

Breaking the Silence:  
Reinforcing and Resisting Gender Norms Through Women's Masturbation

by

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## ABSTRACT

Based on the Foucauldian understanding that sexuality discourse operates as a powerful instrument for the regulation of societies and individuals, this research considers how internalized gender and sexuality discourses affect young women's embodied experiences of masturbation, and more broadly their sexual subjectivity and health. Drawing on interdisciplinary feminist perspectives on gender, sexuality, health, and embodiment, I examine female sexual health within a positive rights framework. That is, I view the rights to both sexual safety and pleasure as essential components of female sexual health, and conceptualize girls and young women as potential sexual agents. By asking young women about their lived experiences of self-pleasure, this research challenges not only the historical legacy of pathologizing female desire and pleasure, but also scholars' tendency to construct female sexuality solely in a heteronormative, partnered context. Based on focus groups, interviews, journals, and questionnaires collected from 109 female college students from diverse ethnic, religious, and sexuality backgrounds in Arizona and Michigan, I employ grounded theory to analyze individual feelings and experiences in the context of larger societal discourses. My findings indicate that when girls internalize negative discourses about masturbation (e.g. as sin or secular stigma), general heteronormative sexuality discourses, and a silence around female self-pleasure, there are severe negative consequences for how they understand and experience masturbation. I argue that they engage in sexual self-surveillance that often results in emotional and physical struggles, as well as the re-inscription of hegemonic cultural discourses on female masturbation, bodies, desire, and pleasure. By

illustrating how even the most private and 'invisible' behavior of masturbation can become a site for regulating female sexuality, this research provides important evidence of the power of increasingly covert mechanisms to govern gendered bodies and subjectivities through self-surveillance. Alternatively, this research also highlights the potential of normalizing self-pleasure for increasing girls' and young women's capacity for resisting oppressive gender and sexuality discourses and behaviors, developing an agentic sexual subjectivity, and feeling sexually empowered. Thus, this research also has practical implications for conceptualizing sexual health for girls and young women in a way that includes the rights to sexual safety and pleasure.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Deemed “graphic, heavy-breathing erotica” and “mommy porn” by the *New York Times*, bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2010) has been credited with increasing the visibility of women’s sexual desires and fantasies in recent years, contributing to a public discourse that acknowledges women as embodied, sexual subjects (Bosman 2012). While female consumption of erotic literature is not new, journalists have argued that the widespread availability and use of e-readers, such as the iPad or Kindle, and the privacy they offer, has provided women with the freedom to consume such sexual content “openly,” without fear of social judgment (Bosman 2012; Chemaly 2012; Redd 2013; Smith 2013). Though the content indisputably reinforces traditional gendered notions of sexuality and relationships, what is revolutionary about the popularity of *Fifty Shades* is the societal acknowledgement that women possess sexual desire and enjoy reading sexual materials, and accordingly that is acceptable for women to talk about such desire and pleasure with others (Chemaly 2012).

Similarly, in recent years female sexual pleasure has become increasingly visible in mainstream marketing through television and radio advertisements for such products as KY Intense sexual lubricant, Trojan Charged condoms, and the Trojan Triphoria vibrator – all products marketed specifically for the enhancement of female pleasure. In addition, the increase in opportunities to purchase sex toys discreetly online in the last several years, as well as Durex and Trojan’s introduction of a line of vibrators available in national chain stores, such as CVS, Walgreens,

Target, and Walmart, has coincided with the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon to result in an increasingly visible discourse on female pleasure (even if only in service of selling more products and in ways that can heighten female sexual insecurities) in the mainstream media. Sex toys have received more media exposure in recent years through advertising, reality television programs, talk shows, and even news specials. As a 2011 *New York Times* article contends, “the creep factor has ... decreased significantly since vibrators began to be portrayed in popular culture” (Howard 2011, 1).

These changes are part of a broader move toward a neoliberal consumer economy, where “pleasure, self-gratification, and personal satisfaction” have become largely accepted and encouraged ideals (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988, 234), and where sex is no longer seen as necessarily tied to kinship or reproduction (Attwood 2006). Despite these cultural changes, in this dissertation I will show that female *self*-pleasure is still rarely discussed and often pilloried, whether in popular or academic representations or discussions. Furthermore, while masturbation has previously been deemed “unsurveillable” as the “paradigmatic form of interior sexual desire” (Laqueur 2003, 270, 231), in this research I will illustrate how this supposedly ‘invisible’ behavior is regulated through both the *presence* and *absence* of particular societal messages about female sexuality and pleasure. Focusing on discourse(s) on women and masturbation *and* women’s lived experiences of masturbation, this dissertation will explore the sources and consequences of this regulation for young women’s understandings and experiences of self-pleasure, embodiment, sexual agency, and health. By so doing, this research will contribute to

our understanding of the complex ways in which power constructs gender and sexuality on both a *discursive* and *material* level.

I begin this chapter by describing the historical and contemporary cultural contexts in which societal discourses about female pleasure and masturbation have evolved in the United States. I then summarize my research agenda for this project, and explain the primary goals and significance of this dissertation. Finally, I provide an overview of the structure of the remainder of this manuscript.

### **Historical Discourses that Surround Female (Self-) Pleasure**

Of course, cultural ideas about female masturbation reflect cultural ideas about female sexual pleasure in general. These discourses have a long history. Therefore, in this section I first provide an overview of general historical discourses around female sexuality and pleasure, and then provide more details about the (minimal) historical discourses specifically around female self-pleasure.

### **Historical Discourses Around Female Sexuality and Pleasure**

For most of Western history, women were largely considered to be as “passionate, lewd, and lascivious” as men (Groneman 2000, 345). While lust was considered sinful, marriage and procreation were viewed as a socially acceptable outlet for these natural passions (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988). In fact, it was popularly accepted that orgasm was required for both women and men for conception to occur (Groneman 2000). Female pleasure was viewed as inextricably tied to marriage and reproduction. Gradually, however, the Christian church came to view women as “inherently more passionate and prone to moral and sexual error” than men, and thus in more need of social control (Coontz 2005, 159).

In the late eighteenth century the rise of evangelical Christianity ushered in a new “ideal of female passionlessness,” where women, or at least white middle and upper class women, instead were conceptualized as innately pure and asexual (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988, 45). Men were considered to be naturally “lustful,” while women were now seen as innately sexually passive and submissive (Groneman 2000). Now defined primarily by their roles as wives and mothers, good, marriageable women were highly desexualized by this “cult of female purity,” which dictated that they exercise internal control over their sexuality and desire to demonstrate their ‘natural’ capacity for moral restraint to men and God (Coontz 2005, 159). Even privately feeling sexual desire was considered to be “dangerous” (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988, 69). Thus, women became responsible not only for regulating their own sexual desires, but for using their moral virtue to inspire men to control their sexual urges and passions as well as maintain the moral purity of the home (Coontz 2005; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Groneman 2000). Moreover, women who did not achieve this ideal of sexual purity were relegated to a lower social status (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988).

Despite the fact that the role of the clitoris in female orgasm was recognized in medical literature at the time, dominant gender ideologies dictated that the female experience of desire or pleasure outside of the context of “love, marriage, and motherhood” was a medical problem (Coontz 2005, 355). Therefore, exhibiting arousal during a doctor’s examination, for instance, was considered evidence of a lack of moral restraint and “excessive sexuality,” resulting in a woman being labeled as deviant, as a “masturbator” or “nymphomaniac” (Groneman 2000, 355).

In the early twentieth century, however, female sexual pleasure gradually transitioned to be evidence of a strong, flourishing marriage (Groneman 2000). With this growing acceptability of a separation between sexuality and reproduction, women faced new demands for sexual “normalcy.” Psychoanalytic theories that predominated at the time dictated that well-adjusted, healthy adult women should be orgasmic, but only through vaginal intercourse (Freud 1965). Therefore, if a woman lacked desire to engage in sex with her husband or failed to orgasm vaginally, she was marked as “frigid” and unfeminine (Groneman 2000, 40). Alternatively, if she exhibited more sexual desire or pleasure than her husband she was still considered deviant.

Female sexuality was further separated from reproduction during the first half of the twentieth century through the rise of the birth control movement. The philosophical shift associated with women’s increased access to birth control helped to usher in a new era of sexual liberalism, where both men’s and women’s sexual pleasure was viewed as important for personal happiness and successful relationships. An increase in open-mindedness and frank discussions about female sexuality, as well as an increase in pre-marital female sexual behavior emerged from this ideological shift, resulting in more women coming to experience sexual pleasure and orgasm during sex than ever before (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988).

### **Historical Discourses Around Female Masturbation**

For most of Western history, masturbation (for both men and women) has been denigrated as a sign of either immorality or illness. As the “radical other of coitus,” masturbation has consistently been perceived as a manifestation of cultural

anxieties, rather than as a sexually healthy or 'normal' activity (Laqueur 2003, 371). Autonomous and non-reproductive in nature, lacking public punitive and health consequences, masturbation has arguably been conceived as the quintessential 'invisible' sexual behavior. Despite being a largely private practice, masturbation has nevertheless played an important public role, posing both a physical and symbolic challenge to societal attempts to control private behavior.

While there is a long history of religious condemnation of masturbation, most of the prevailing discourse pertains solely to male masturbation. According to Thomas Laqueur (2003), female masturbation was rarely explicitly addressed historically because women were "but imperfect men" and thus morally uninteresting (100). Additionally, because the idea of masturbation as a moral transgression derived from the biblical story of Onan, who was said to have "spilled his seed upon the ground" (and not inside a woman's vagina), it was difficult to translate the sin of Onan onto women's lives (129). Hence, during the reform of the Christian Church in the twelfth century, and like other acts (e.g. sodomy, bestiality) which threatened institutions ordained by God (e.g. marriage, celibacy), masturbation came to be viewed as a "truly heinous sin" and "criminal wickedness" for adult men only (145-147). However, as the threat of masturbation evolved from the physical loss of reproductive fluids to the experience of "false pleasure," women came to be included under a modern definition of onanism, "as they produced desire and only desire in their solitary reveries" (203). In this way, because it challenged the role of procreation as the "ultimate function" of sex (Abramson and Pinkerton



2002, 6-7), masturbation did eventually (albeit subtly) come to be viewed as a sin for men and women.

As alluded to above, female masturbation was often perceived as either indicative of, or leading to “disease of mind and body” (Maines 1999; Laqueur 1990, 229). For this reason, the majority of the information that exists regarding female masturbation specifically is from male physicians’ records. To treat such “diseases,” some doctors utilized mechanical vibrators to induce a “hysterical paroxysm” (orgasm) in patients. This was viewed not as a sexual service, but a legitimate medical therapy (Maines 1999, 9).

The cultural view of female masturbation as a physical medical problem eventually evolved into a view of it as a psychological problem. As referenced above, Western cultural authorities have been particularly concerned that sexual pleasure is “addicting,” potentially resulting in a loss of “proper” sexual behavior and an increase in sexual desire and activity. With regard to nymphomania, “women’s presumably milder sexual appetite meant that any signs of excess might signal that she was dangerously close to the edge of sexual madness” (Groneman 1994, 6). Sigmund Freud brought the concept of female masturbation under the psychoanalytic lens in the early twentieth century, regarding masturbation as natural in the young, but a sign of stunted development in adults (Laqueur 2003). Contending that “masturbation was further removed from the nature of women than men,” Freud (1965) set a long-standing precedent for associating female masturbation with guilt, neurosis, and hysteria (255). In this way, Freud set the

stage for the reinforcement of a sexual double standard that stigmatizes women when they appear to be as “sexual” as men.

That said, other than this minimal medicalized discourse which centered on female masturbation as a symptom of physical or psychological illness, traditional Western cultural authorities have largely been silent about female masturbation. This silence could result from the long-standing belief that women do not possess sexual desire (Coontz 2005). Another possibility is the threat that the masturbating woman poses to traditional gender and sexuality norms, as men and reproduction are rendered superfluous to woman’s experience of sexuality and pleasure (Brenot 2005). This female self-sufficiency may have been perceived as a form of independence, suggesting that women had the capacity to act as equals to men.

### **Contemporary Discourses Regarding Female (Self-) Pleasure**

As noted earlier, contemporary ideas about female sexual pleasure and masturbation are in flux. Therefore, in this section I introduce the dominant (and often contradictory) discourses around female sexuality and pleasure that provide an important context for understanding how U.S. society currently conceptualizes and regards female self-pleasure. I discuss primary messages communicated through major sources of sexual socialization, including school-based sex education, families, and the mainstream media (which will be further elaborated upon in Chapter 4), as well as sources of resistance, such as feminist and LGBTQ activism.

#### **Sex Education**

Abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) sexual education curricula have gradually come to predominate in schools in recent decades. These programs are

not only designed to discourage adolescent sexual behavior, but they tend to reflect traditional Christian moral values, and consequently advocate heterosexual marriage as the only context for safe sex. This “religious and moralizing curricula ... lodges sexual education in fear and shame, firmly burying discussions of desire and pleasure” (Fine and McClelland 2006, 306-307). In addition, not only do these programs rarely present non-intercourse behaviors which would still allow teenagers to experience pleasure while remaining safe and “technically” abstinent (such as masturbation), many also utilize scare tactics, such as associating sex outside of marriage with disease and possible death (Fine and McClelland 2006).

Even in the context of more comprehensive sexual education programs (which aim to include age-appropriate, medically accurate information on such topics as physiological development, relationships, contraception, disease prevention, and abstinence), educators often communicate hidden or informal “shaming lessons” about female sexuality to students (Fields 2008, 17). For example, female and male teachers frequently obscure female bodily experiences and pleasures through the offering of only disembodied or clinical representations of female genitalia and the framing of female sexual organs as reproductive, rather than as potential sites of pleasure. This “excising” of the clitoris from representations and discussions of female sexuality contributes to the silencing of girls’ sexuality (134). Thus, while boys consistently hear about their bodies as site of agency and sexual pleasure through depictions and discussions of the penis and ejaculation, girls must contend with a “missing discourse of desire” in sexual education (Fine 1988, 31-32).

Ultimately, advocates of both AOUM and comprehensive sexual education programs ignore the potential for adolescent girls' learning about, seeking, or experiencing sexual pleasure. Instead, they present "sexual knowledge as intimately connected to danger" (Fields 2008, 152). As a consequence, female self-pleasure is rarely ever included in formal or informal sexual education lessons in schools. In fact, the idea of incorporating masturbation into sexual education programs was vehemently rejected when Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders suggested at the 1994 United Nations AIDS conference that masturbation should be taught to young people as a means of preventing them from engaging in riskier forms of sexual activity – because of public outcry she was promptly fired by then President Bill Clinton (Juffer 1998). Even in the rare cases when teachers engage students in frank discussions of female bodies and pleasure, or mention the clitoris in any way, the topic of female masturbation is still generally absent (Fields 2008).

### **Families**

While numerous institutions (e.g. schools, medicine) have long deployed strategic discourses in order to control the sexuality of children and adolescents, according to Michel Foucault (1976), sexuality has "its privileged point of development in the family" (108). Because sex is inextricably tied up in matters of family (e.g. marriage, reproduction), parents and other relatives play a particularly central role in communicating sexual norms to young people. Foucault suggests that parents – as the primary influence during the early formative years – shape their children's sexuality not only by how they explicitly discuss or manage their children's sexual attitudes and actions (e.g. sending them to a psychiatrist for

treatment because they masturbate), but implicitly through their own sexual behaviors, feelings, and conversations as well.

Recent shifts in sexual education have resulted in parents possessing even more power as “guardians of their children’s lives” (Elliott 2012, 10). Parents, however, frequently reiterate the same heteronormative and prohibitive ideologies about female sexuality that predominate in schools. Heterosexuality is simply assumed and expected, with any non-heterosexual identities or behaviors rendered invisible or deemed non-normative. For example, parents routinely vilify adolescent girls’ sexual expression by constructing heterosexual marriage as the safest and most healthy context for sex, with non-marital sex perceived as especially dangerous for girls (in contrast to boys). Parents tend to subscribe to an “adultist framework,” where they assume that children and adolescents are and should be sexually innocent (Fields 2008, 19). They naively believe that adults possess control over adolescents’ sexual knowledge, and consequently their sexual behaviors, while ignoring the possibility that adolescents might seek out or obtain sexual knowledge and experience on their own. Even when they do consider that teenagers might acquire sexual information from other sources, most parents mistakenly assume that teenagers only need to learn about the potential dangers, and not pleasures, of sex (Elliott 2012, 69). They fear that talking and knowing about sexual pleasure will incite adolescents to seek out sexual experiences on their own.

One of the first things that many children are taught by their parents is that their genitals are “private” (Lamb 2001, 16). While it is subtly communicated to boys that it is healthy and natural for them to possess a “strong interest in their

genitals,” girls learn to “straitjacket” themselves (17, 69). As a consequence, while boys learn that it is acceptable, and even expected, for them to engage in genital self-exploration as long as it is not in the presence of others, girls learn that their genitals should be private and kept hidden even from themselves. Parents further discourage girls from masturbating because it challenges the notion that they are sexually innocent, and thus is “not something good girls do” (100). Girls raised in religious households are particularly unlikely to hear about masturbation from their parents, let alone in a positive context, as both religious mothers and fathers frequently express more discomfort about the idea of speaking about masturbation with their daughters than any other sexual topic (e.g. oral sex, condoms) (Farrington, Holgate, McIntyre, and Bulsara 2013; Miller et al. 2013). Hence, even when parents do not explicitly communicate to their daughters that masturbation is “wrong” or “bad” for girls (especially in contrast to boys), they often implicitly convey the same message in other ways (e.g. by *not* talking about masturbation).

### **Mainstream Media**

As will be elaborated upon in future chapters, female sexuality and pleasure, especially as pertaining to youth, has been represented in the mainstream media in a myriad of contradictory ways in recent years. Girls’ and young women’s sexual agency and empowerment – their capacity to feel in control of their sexual desires, bodies, and behaviors and to feel entitled to and capable of exercising that control – has been depicted as non-existent or scary *and* valorized as essential for female sexual development. Girls and young women have also received both the message that the display of female bodily pleasure is non-normative or dangerous *and* that

their bodies should be good at exhibiting pleasure. As one of the few spaces that has depicted female masturbation in any capacity, the mainstream media has communicated similar mixed messages about self-pleasure to girls and young women as well.

**Representations of Female Sexual Agency.** When discussed in mainstream popular culture, adolescent female sexual pleasure and agency tend to be demonized. For example, recently a large pool of popular literature which examines the 'sexualization' of girls and adolescents has emerged. Books such as *The Lolita Effect* (2008), *Girls Gone Skank* (2008), and *So Sexy So Soon* (2008) seek to expose the many ways that present-day American culture, particularly the media, sexually exploits young women and girls. For instance, in *Oral Sex is the New Goodnight Kiss*, Sharlene Azam (2009) examines the recent appearance of teenage prostitution in affluent suburban communities. Non-academic in nature, all of these books are meant to serve as a 'wake-up call' to naïve parents – to demonstrate that even 'good' white middle and upper class girls may be enticed into participating in a variety of 'age-inappropriate' or illicit sexual activities. Ultimately, all of these books demonize what they consider to be the 'eroticization' of childhood, leaving no space for considering the existence of forms of 'healthy' sexuality and desire for these girls and young women. As a result, the exercise and experience of sexual pleasure and agency, particularly for young people, are still considered to be normative masculine, not feminine, characteristics.

At the same time, female sexual pleasure and agency have recently become highly valorized within mainstream culture for girls and young women. Based on

the concept of a “postfeminist sensibility,” Rosalind Gill (2007b) argues that the notion of choice, being one’s authentic self, and pleasing oneself have become central for young women, with a rhetoric of empowerment dominating media discourse (153). A primary component of this “postfeminist sensibility” is the performance of sexiness and femininity, with girls experimenting and “playing” with their sexual “power” (151). Because possession of a “sexy” body is commonly presented in the media as the primary source of identity and power for women, many young women enact what Michelle Lazar (2006) refers to as “power femininity.” Girls appear to adopt an empowered, desiring, and sexual feminine identity that purportedly operates as an exercise of self-determination and as a form of resistance against their previous “sex object” status (505). Hence, the performance of heteronormative feminine sexuality and the deployment of sexual power are conflated.

The mainstreaming of “raunch” culture and *Sex and the City’s* “have sex like a man” mantra has resulted in the emergence of what Ariel Levy (2005) refers to as “raunch feminism.” She argues that girls and young women are increasingly adopting a male model of sexual power where participation in the pornography industry, sexual objectification, and body modification practices are constructed as a path to liberation rather than oppression. However, while wearing “porn star” t-shirts or participating in a pole-dancing aerobics class might challenge some conventions of normative femininity through the public “performance of active, confident...sexuality,” some feminist researchers argue that seeking power through a male model does *not* challenge conventions of masculinity, instead, that these



performances reinforce hegemonic gender relations (Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010, 124, 126; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Thompson 1998). Gill (2007a) contends that these young women do not possess 'real' power, but rather have been endowed with a conditional agency rooted in the reinforcement of traditional gender norms. Gill argues that it is the display or performance of a certain kind of empowered sexual knowledge, practice, and agency that has become normative. Moreover, Gill and others contend that girls' sexual agency tends to be represented as legitimately "active" in the media only when linked to consumption (Gill 2007a, 153; Ticknell, Chambers, Van Loon, and Hudson 2003). The discourse that conflates political agency with a commitment to consumerism, employing a rhetoric of individualism and choice to construct women as new kinds of sexual consumer citizens, leads young women to consider obtaining breast implants or a Brazilian bikini wax as an avenue to sexual empowerment (Jackson and Westrupp 2010).

Research on the sexualization of culture overwhelmingly concludes that this "postfeminist" media discourse contains a disciplinary element. While "hailed through a discourse of 'can-do girl power'," Gill (2007b) contends that young women's bodies "are powerfully reinscribed as sexual objects; women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, but they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance which has no historical precedent" (163). Serving as a guide for girls' self-management, such popular culture representations may impose new discourses that manage individuals through the internalization of regimes of disciplinary power. Evans, Riley, and Shankar's (2010) "technologies of sexiness" framework reiterates this point by arguing that these supposedly sexually

“empowered” girls actually draw on existing dominant discourses of female sexuality in order to formulate these “new” sexual subjectivities, consequently reinscribing hegemonic discourses rather than challenging them (127).

**Representations of Female Sexual Bodies and Pleasure.** The normative pleasure-experiencing or performing female sexual body has also been constructed (and reconstructed) in recent years in various ways by popular media discourses. While previously the desiring or pleasure-experiencing female sexual body was constructed as ‘deviant’, in recent years a pleasure or orgasm imperative has emerged within mainstream discourses. “The societal message is that you *have* to be sexual, you have to *want* to be sexual, you have to be *good* at being sexual, and you have to be *normally* sexual” (Tiefer 2004, 129). In this case, being a “normally sexual” woman equates to achieving orgasm through vaginal-penile intercourse without clitoral stimulation, often because women associate “normal” with pleasing men (Fahs 2011a). Rooted in the psychoanalytic legacy of sexual development, the media reinforces the notion that vaginal sexuality is superior to clitoral sexuality (Freud 1965, 133-134). For instance, representations of sex in mainstream media and pornography tend to valorize the vaginal or G-spot orgasm, and depict women often and easily achieving multiple orgasms. As a result of these representations, women who do not achieve orgasm from vaginal penetration easily or at all, may feel marginalized and think there is something wrong or unnatural about their bodies because it requires so much “work” to have an orgasm (Jackson and Scott 2001). Accordingly, women may feel pressured to produce an “audible orgasm” or “fake it” to provide evidence that their bodies’ are sexually ‘normal’ (107-108).

While advertisements for such products as Trojan Charged condoms challenge traditional sexuality discourses by situating female pleasure as of central importance, they do so through the invocation of traditional patriarchal sexuality discourses. Female sexual pleasure is generally only emphasized to the point that it reinforces traditional sexual dynamics in which a “gentleman” is expected to control the sexual interaction and give or “treat” the “lady” to pleasure, for example. In this way, such seemingly liberal and female pleasure-focused advertisements actually reinforce the idea that men are the primary bearers of sexual power and knowledge – as the pleasure “givers” – ignoring the possibility that women could be the ones to take action to increase their own pleasure during partnered sex (or alone).

The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has also continued to subject representations of female pleasure in mainstream film to a harsh double standard. While men are routinely depicted experiencing pleasure or orgasm through oral sex in rated-R films, for example, scenes depicting women experiencing an orgasm or displaying sexual pleasure graphically from oral sex has repeatedly resulted in NC17 ratings, most recently in the case of *Blue Valentine* and *Charlie Countryman* (Child 2013; Zeitchik 2010); whereas scenes of graphic violence, including sexual assault, frequently result in an R-rating. For example, while an extended scene depicting a woman having an orgasm had to be edited for the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry* to achieve an R-rating, no changes were required for a brutal rape and murder scene that occurs later in the film. Similarly, a female masturbation scene was significantly cut down (to the point that is difficult to realize that the young women is masturbating) in the premiere of the CW's new adolescent program

*Reign* (Collman 2013), while an attempted rape scene remained later in the episode. Limiting the representations of female pleasure available to U.S. youth and adults in this way not only serves to perpetuate traditional ideas about gender and sexuality, it also denies young women and men the opportunity to develop a stronger and more critical understanding of female sexuality and pleasure.

**Representations of Female Self-Pleasure.** As mentioned earlier, one of the few spaces where female masturbation has at least begun to permeate present-day cultural sexuality discourses is within the media. Lacking a discourse on *embodied, autonomous* female sexual pleasure, the few spaces where female masturbation does emerge within mainstream media discourses appear to be highly performative and both reflect and reinforce more conventional hegemonic sexual scripts.

For example, the *Sex and the City* episode entitled “The Turtle and the Hare” introduced “The Rabbit” vibrator to its large female audience for the first time in 1998. Since then, particularly in recent years, the visibility of the vibrator has increased in mainstream film and television and advertising. While the “vibrator-wielding woman” challenges traditional constructions of female sexuality, she does so by adopting a male model of sexual pleasure: using a vibrator to orgasm quickly, without foreplay, romance, or love. In addition, purchasing a vibrator requires consumer participation in the male-dominated sex industry (Juffer 1998). The depiction of a phallic-shaped vibrator (like “The Rabbit”) also reiterates the centrality of men to female sexuality. Ironically, the surfacing of dildos and penetrative vibrators as a form of technological advancement may in fact remove women’s sexual pleasure further from what would be conceived as “natural,” but

instead may actually reinforce this androcentric assumption of women achieving orgasm through a phallus of some sort. The mechanization of the orgasm could alienate a woman from her own body; distancing her from the experience of “natural” sexual pleasure achieved through manual stimulation or interaction with a partner. In this way we can see how representations of the vibrator have the potential to operate simultaneously as a form of resistance to hegemonic sexual norms, as well as reinforce them.

A recently aired mainstream television commercial for the Trojan Triphoria vibrator (2010) depicts a number of women excited to use this product. Be that as it may, the vibrators’ use is emphasized primarily within a heteronormative context – not only is it given as a gift at a bridal shower, but the bride-to-be’s fiancé is depicted as incredibly enthusiastic about receiving this gift as well. Similarly, while major news outlets have chronicled this supposed increase in the visibility of the vibrator in mainstream film, television, and advertising, as well as the growing popularity of “Passion Parties,” the focus within these articles has been on the increase in social acceptability of vibrators *within* “sexual relationships” and in the context of “couples investing in their sexual pleasure” (Jayson 2012; Rosen 2013). For instance, the word “masturbation” is almost never used in these pieces, and terms such as “self-pleasure” or “self-stimulation” are only occasionally employed. Consequently, while we indeed may be seeing more discussions and representations of vibrators or other sex toys in mainstream discourses, this does not necessarily appear to significantly disrupt the silence or increase the social acceptability of female masturbation. It is also important to note the profit-driven nature of these

discourses, for in the rare spaces where we see some allusion to female *self*-pleasure, it is very much oriented towards selling products. As Hilary Howard (2011) smartly notes in the *New York Times*, “Of course a plastic battery-powered device is not needed for self-stimulation, but there is no market potential in that idea.”

Another recent example comes from an episode of the popular *ABC Family* adolescent television show *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* aired in 2010 and entitled “Just Say Me,” where teenage girls are depicted engaging in a public campaign, declaring that they will turn to masturbation instead of having sex with the boys. However, the campaign appears to be a sexual power play, a performance intended to manipulate the boys by holding out on them sexually (Frank 2013). Only using the term “masturbation” once in the entire episode, the show’s characters employ a slew of euphemisms, suggesting that “masturbation” is a taboo term or concept. Any recognition that these girls might experience sexual desire is generally couched within a heteronormative framework, resulting in the recuperation of essentialist notions about women as sexually reliant on men. While a small proportion of the girls are depicted as possessing a genuine sexual desire and interest in masturbation, the majority appear to be performing a particular version of liberated femininity.

In the last several years *Oprah* has aired several episodes where guests, such as psychologist Dr. Jennifer Berman, discuss female masturbation. While helping to construct female masturbation as normative and healthy in the eyes of young people and parents, the focus tends to be specifically on potential psychological benefits or

masturbation as a mechanism for maintaining abstinence, ignoring any aspects relating specifically to female sexual pleasure. Similar to the language utilized in mainstream news articles and *Secret Life*, the advocating of euphemisms such as “self-stimulation” in lieu of “masturbation” by these “experts” contributes to the idea that “masturbation” is taboo and wrong for women (in contrast with men) as well.

The aforementioned *Fifty Shades* phenomenon does appear to have increased popular visibility of the possibility that, possessing sexual desires and fantasies, women might act on them independently by masturbating. For example, in reaction to the astounding popularity and resulting media dialogue regarding *Fifty Shades*, *Saturday Night Live* featured a parody of an Amazon.com Kindle advertisement, which featured several mothers masturbating while reading *Fifty Shades* in different ways (i.e. vibrator, bathtub water jet, rubbing against a clothes dryer). Likened to *Sex and the City* for its ability to get “women talking about sex,” it is apparent how *Fifty Shades* has at least minimally (and even if only in a comical fashion), helped to bring female masturbation into the public discourse (Cohen 2012). It is also important to keep in mind the narrowness of these representations, as female masturbation is only minimally discussed in the book itself, and only in a heteronormative, patriarchal context, where the male protagonist, Christian, attempts to exert power and control over the female protagonist’s sexuality. For example, Anastasia signs a contract indicating that she “shall not touch or pleasure herself sexually without permission” from Christian, and indicates that she has no experience with solitary masturbation prior to his encouragement and instruction (James 2011, 170, 114).

Probably the most pervasive discussion of women and masturbation in the mainstream media in recent years revolved around tea party GOP Delaware senatorial candidate Christine O'Donnell's former anti-masturbation activism. Largely demonized and mocked for her *anti*-masturbation perspective by popular news and entertainment media, O'Donnell's perspective on masturbation was often discussed alongside other seemingly "foolish" notions, such as her fascination with witchcraft. A widely disseminated satirized portrayal of O'Donnell on *Saturday Night Live*, for example, portrays her as a compulsive masturbator (and a witch!). Consistent with the majority of representations of masturbating women in popular media as in comedies or comedic situations (e.g. *The Ugly Truth*, *Not Another Teen Movie*, *Hysteria*), in this case the female masturbator is portrayed as a humorous element of fiction, sending the message that masturbation is not something "real" or "normal" women do. While technically disrupting the cultural silence around female masturbation, such representations also simultaneously perpetuate the historical legacy of pathologizing independent sexual desires and behavior in women. Furthermore, constructing O'Donnell as sexually deviant in this way largely functioned to discredit her as a viable political candidate.

While such representations would appear to challenge general negative societal ideologies about masturbation, the extent to which the media was obsessed with ridiculing O'Donnell for her position on masturbation suggests that it is still considered socially unacceptable for a woman to vocalize her opinion about such a taboo and 'masculine' topic. Given the way that Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders was so quickly and effectively silenced for broaching the topic of masturbation years



earlier (as referenced above), it appears that the figure of a (potentially) powerful and influential woman speaking publically about masturbation, regardless of her perspective, may be perceived as a threat to male sexual and political hegemony. Thus, while O'Donnell's anti-masturbation stance was ridiculed and looked upon negatively by the news media (which we might initially view as positive), in this case the news and popular media avidly colluded to "Other" and silence a woman who introduced masturbation to public discourse. In this instance, they appear to largely reinscribe, rather than challenge, historical discourses around sexuality.

### **Activism**

It is important to keep in mind, however, that "where this is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 1976, 95). Feminist and LGBTQ activists and scholars have attempted to resist discourses that create 'normalized' sexual bodies for decades. Possession of the knowledge and freedom to exercise control over one's own sexual body has long been a hallmark of feminist and gay liberation movements (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988), and masturbation has played an important personal and political role toward this end. For instance, in addition to advocating for the demedicalization of female sexuality (that is, lobbying against the social construction of "normal" female sexual functioning as an individual pathology or medical "problem" in need of a medical "treatment"), valorization of the clitoral orgasm through the encouragement of female masturbation was one strategy employed by second-wave feminists for resisting dominant gendered social constructions – the idea being that learning about the body was a way for a woman to "revel in individuality" and "liberate her from the strictures of patriarchal society"

(Juffer 1998, 82). Books like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971) and Betty Dodson's *Liberating Masturbation* (1974), in particular, played an important role in promoting masturbation as a path to individual personal and political liberation for women. In addition, within the gay liberation movement, the act of self-pleasure represented "alternative sexuality and sexual self-expression" more generally (Laqueur 2003, 82). In this way, masturbation was adopted and advocated by women's rights and gay rights movements as a political act, as a practice which signified the embodiment of autonomy, knowledge, and power, and a larger symbolic challenge to traditional gender and sexuality ideals which situated heterosexual, penile-vaginal intercourse, and female sexual passivity and purity as the norm.

Due to the advances garnered from the sexual revolution, and a widespread shift in the conceptualization of masturbation from a medical or psychological problem to a natural and healthy sexual behavior, the fight for the right to masturbate has lost its fervor within these movements in recent years. While some feminist artists and performers continue to draw popular attention to the pleasure-related struggles women face and to deconstruct myths surrounding female pleasure and orgasm, through annual performances of Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*, for example, or Sophia Wallace's recent *Clitoracy* art exhibit<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace's mixed-media art project explores "the global obsession with sexualizing female bodies in a world that is illiterate when it comes to female sexuality," revealing "100 Natural Laws" about female sexual anatomy and pleasure which challenge dominant hegemonic conceptions about women's bodies and sexual experiences. Examples include: "The vaginal orgasm is a myth invented by Freud in 1905," "Penetration with a penis is just one of innumerable ways to have sex," and "If the clitoris is so well known why do we see virtually no representations of it anywhere?" (Wallace 2013).

masturbation remains a highly controversial and taboo issue today in the public sphere, *especially* for women.

### **Research Agenda**

The fact that the majority of the attempts to shatter the silence surrounding female masturbation in mainstream culture have resulted in the ultimate recuperation of hegemonic sexual ideologies indicates that there is significant resistance to the deconstruction of these patriarchal norms. Despite the overwhelming 'visibility' of female sexuality in the media and the few spaces where the silence around female masturbation is disrupted and even challenged, in stark contrast to the multitude of discourses around male sexual subjectivity and agency in our society, it appears that girls and young women have few discourses to draw on regarding how it looks or feels to experience oneself as an independent sexual being, possess (rather than simply perform) sexual desire, or express entitlement to sexual pleasure. Internalizing these cultural images, young women are likely to interpret this silence to mean that the desirous and pleasure-seeking female body is dirty, shameful, and embarrassing (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Bordo 1993). In such a way, it is apparent how the social construction of gendered and sexualized bodies through popular discourses may delineate the boundaries between normative and non-normative sexuality, and in so doing, shape how individual young women interpret and experience their solitary sexual feelings and behaviors.

Consequently, examining mainstream cultural discourses that are both present and absent regarding female (self-) pleasure in present-day U.S. society is critical – the internalization of these discourses not only has the potential to result

in the reinforcement of a number of traditional hegemonic gender and sexuality norms, but also may have concrete implications for girls' and young women's experiences of sexuality, pleasure, and health. While the existence of a societal discourse on masturbation contributes to its normalization as a topic of discussion and behavior for most men (Gagnon and Simon 2005), it is currently unclear as to the extent to which self-pleasure is normalized (or demonized) for girls and women. Without available discourses to draw upon to make meaning of female masturbation, it seems likely that most girls and young women would lack a sexual script – a socially accepted guideline for how one should feel or act in a particular sexual scenario – for talking about or engaging in self-stimulation (Gagnon and Simon 2005).

What is more, as referenced earlier, while boys often hear about their bodies as a site of agency and sexual pleasure through depictions and discussions of the penis and ejaculation in educational and popular sources, girls must contend with a “missing discourse of desire” (Fields 2008; Fine 1988). Thus it seems that the absence of discussion regarding female masturbation specifically would further inhibit girls' and young women's ability to experience “embodied desire” – to feel and identify sexual feelings as connected to genital experience (Lamb 2010). As a consequence, while the “tools” of masturbation may teach boys about their bodies (such as that the penis is the focal point of sexual pleasure) (Kimmel 2005), girls are likely largely denied access to comparable embodied sexual knowledge.

If it is generally considered socially acceptable for boys to spend years in pre-adolescence interacting with and learning about their sexual bodies through

masturbation, but that is not the case for girls, it is likely that most girls would not develop a sexual understanding of themselves until they engage in partnered sexual activity. As a consequence, their sexual self-concept would be largely Other-oriented rather than self-oriented, and thus inhibit their ability to assert themselves regarding pleasure or safety in partnered sexual contexts. Hence, as long as girls and young women are largely denied access to information and representations that would help them develop an embodied sexual subjectivity through masturbation, it would seem that boys and men would continue to have a “sexual advantage.”

Studying the extent to which a gender self-pleasure disparity exists and its individual and social consequences is important because as long as men are perceived as possessing knowledge and power over sex and pleasure in this way, the conception that men have, and should have, power over women in other domains will persist. The fact that *not* providing representations and forums for girls to learn and talk about their bodies and possibilities for self-pleasure may have real, physical negative consequences for individual girls’ and young women’s sexual subjectivity and health has important implications for families, educators, clergy, health professionals, policy-makers, and activists alike. Furthermore, understanding how such a silence not only contributes to, but actually perpetuates, broader societal gender inequalities is essential for considering possibilities for enacting material changes to improve the lives of women and girls.

### **Gaps in Knowledge**

As I will show in the following chapter, little research exists which interrogates the discourses around female masturbation or examines the

phenomenology of young women's experiences of self-pleasure. Due to past moral panics regarding the supposed dangers of female sexuality and more recent concerns about the sexualization of culture, scholars tend to focus on 'visible' sexual risks, resulting in a dearth of research that examines the more 'intangible' or 'invisible', pleasure and desire-oriented aspects of female sexuality. Because young women's sexuality has historically been culturally defined as dangerous and non-normative, their sexuality is often perceived in academic and policy research as a psychological and social problem which requires prevention or intervention (Nathanson 1991; Welsh, Rostosky, and Kawagushi 2000). For this reason, the majority of studies equate sexuality directly with penile-vaginal intercourse, considering only the 'visible' consequences of engaging in this activity, such as pregnancy or STI transmission, as relevant to girls' and young women's sexuality. Those populations that exhibit more of these 'visible' consequences are the ones that take the brunt of social policies concerning sexuality, including young girls, poor and working class youth, teenagers with disabilities, black and Latino adolescents, and LGBTQ youth (Fine and McClelland 2006). By focusing on girls' and young women's sexuality solely in the context of risk and danger, these researchers reinforce the widespread culture of fear around female sexuality, framing girls and young women solely as sexual victims with no potential to experience or enact sexual agency.

While a promising new pool of feminist theorizing on girls' and young women's lived experiences of sexual subjectivity, agency, and empowerment within a positive sexual rights framework has emerged in recent years, little empirical data

has been collected on the realities of girls' and young women's experiences of sexual desire, pleasure, and power. What is more, the majority of existing research on female self-pleasure across all age groups tends to be oriented toward mental health-related outcomes. These studies are primarily quantitative, focusing on masturbation prevalence and frequency and its relationship with various psychological correlates (e.g. guilt, depression). These studies' samples tend to be highly homogeneous, consisting primarily of educated white, heterosexual, and sexually experienced women. The few studies that do recruit more diverse samples almost always seek to compare and establish between-group differences in terms of attitudes towards, and prevalence of, masturbation, obscuring the many commonalities between women's experiences of masturbation, as well as within-group differences. Most contemporary studies also largely presuppose that masturbation is universally pleasurable and empowering for women.

### **Study Purpose**

Consistent with the World Health Organization's (2004) updated definition of sexual health as including "not merely the absence" of sexual harm or pain, but "requir[ing] a positive and respective approach to sexuality," I employ a positive sexual rights framework in this research (3). In the past, much research on girls' and young women's sexual health has focused solely their *negative right* to live free "from" sexual dangers such as rape, HIV infection, or unplanned pregnancy, and how to protect them from such potential harms (Chaffour 2009; Lottes 2013; Parker et al. 2004). While acknowledging the importance of these negative rights, in this research I primarily situate girls' and young women's sexual health in a *positive*

*rights* context. That is, I consider the freedoms girls and young women should be sexually entitled “to” beyond the absence of harm and pain, such as the embodied experience of desire and pleasure, as essential human rights (Bullough 2004; Oriel 2005b; World Health Organization 2004). Accordingly, I aspire for this project to contribute to an understanding of sexual health that includes the rights to sexual safety *and* pleasure. Given that so much of the existing research on women and sexual pleasure revolves around *partnered* pleasure, and because the general exercise and experience of sexual pleasure and agency is still often considered to be normatively masculine, not feminine, it is clear that examining young women and *self*-pleasure is key for examining the many ways that gender, power, and pleasure interact to influence girls’ and young women’s lives.

Based on the Foucauldian understanding that sexuality discourse operates as a powerful instrument for the regulation of societies and individuals, this research considers how discourse(s) around this supposedly “un-surveillable” and “invisible” behavior (Laqueur 2003), shape individual ideologies and experiences regarding female masturbation. As the first study of its kind and breadth to situate women and masturbation as the primary subject of analysis (to the best of my knowledge), this research explores the sources and consequences of this regulation, as well as possibilities for resistance, examining both female masturbation *discourse(s)* and *women’s lived experiences* of masturbation.

Drawing on literature from a variety of disciplines, including women and gender studies, psychology, sociology, history, media/cultural studies, education, and public health, the principal goal of this project is to investigate how internalized



gender and sexuality discourses (whether seemingly oppressive or liberating) affect young women's embodied experiences of masturbation. What are the dominant (and missing) discourses into which girls are socialized regarding female masturbation in the United States? What are the consequences of internalizing these discourses for how girls and young women come to understand and experience sexual self-pleasure? How do girls and young women come to challenge the resulting internalized ideologies, if at all? In what ways does masturbation *facilitate* and *constrain* young women's experiences of sexual agency and subjectivity? In what ways does masturbation function as both a tool of gender *resistance* and *oppression*? Finally, what are the broader implications of these internalized ideologies and experiences of self-pleasure for young women's partnered sexual pleasure and health?

I used a feminist ethnographic approach to answer these questions, employing a multi-method triangulation data collection technique that included semi-structured one-on-one and group interviews and longitudinal sexual experience journals. The final sample consists of 109 female<sup>2</sup> current or former college students between the ages of 18 and 32 in Arizona and Michigan. In accordance with my feminist methodological approach, I used grounded theory to analyze the resulting data with NVivo data analysis software.

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<sup>2</sup> Because the majority of my participants identified as "female" and as "women," throughout this manuscript I refer to my participants generally as "girls" or "women." However, when relaying the narratives of the two participants who specifically identified as "female-bodied" and not as "women," I use the term "female-bodied individual" and use "they/their" (rather than "she/her") pronouns.

## **Study Significance**

This transdisciplinary feminist research – that is, research that employs a feminist lens to not only incorporate, but transform a variety of existing disciplinary theoretical and methodological perspectives to create new knowledge – will contribute to our understanding of the complex ways in which power constructs gender and sexuality on a *discursive* and *material* level, as well as add to our understanding of the meanings and mechanisms of sexual agency, subjectivity, pleasure, and health for young women. Hence, these findings will have both theoretical and practical implications.

On a theoretical level, this research will first and foremost expand our limited understanding of girls' and young women's lived experiences of masturbation. Second, this study will extend existing knowledge about present-day discourses around female self-pleasure and the consequences of their internalization. In this way, the research will provide important evidence of the intensification of the regulation of female sexuality through sexual self-surveillance. Finally, this study will expand our theoretical understanding of the relationship between sexual pleasure, subjectivity, and health for girls and young women by demonstrating: 1) how masturbation facilitates the development of an embodied sexual subjectivity 2) how masturbation may be a tool for facilitating partnered sexual agency (in relation to pleasure and safety), 3) how masturbation may be a tool for facilitating awareness of and challenging social inequalities, 4) how important embodiment – feeling mentally connected to bodily sensations – is to the experience of sexual agency, and 5) how vital it is to conceptualize sexual agency as a process.

These theoretical contributions will also have important practical implications for how families, educators, clergy, health professionals, policy-makers, and activists think and talk about, as well as advocate for, sexual pleasure and health with girls and young women in the future. The findings provide important insight into potential strategies for breaking the silence around female self-pleasure – how to offer girls and young women access to sexual scripts from a variety of sources for understanding, talking about, and engaging in masturbation, as well as safe spaces to engage with and develop those scripts, so that they can potentially develop a more critical understanding of their bodies and its possibilities. As a result, it is my hope that young women could feel more in control of their sexuality and empowered to claim their sexual rights, and consequently be more likely to challenge traditional norms of passive femininity and double standards of sexual behavior. In this way, I foresee this research as not only contributing to an updated model of sexual health for young women that includes the rights to sexual safety *and* pleasure, but also yielding concrete implications for public policies and private practices as well.

### **Chapter Organization**

In the next chapter I provide a comprehensive review of existing literature and theoretical perspectives relevant to the ethnographic study of young women's lived experiences of masturbation. I provide important background on the positive sexual health framework, elaborating upon recent theoretical debates regarding such concepts as sexual subjectivity, agency, and empowerment, and their relationship to embodiment and health. I summarize various facets of the existing

literature on female masturbation, in the United States and abroad. Finally, I highlight the trends in existing research on female sexual health and self-pleasure, and explain how my research will fill in significant gaps in existing knowledge.

In Chapter 3 I provide an overview of my methodological framework, research design, and analysis. I describe my recruitment process and data collection protocols for the focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and journals, as well the characteristics of my sample. I discuss my use of grounded theory to analyze this data utilizing Nvivo software. Finally, I review the primary tenets of feminist methodology, and address how my research is explicitly both feminist and transdisciplinary.

Based on participants' retrospective narratives about their youth, in Chapter 4 I analyze the messages girls learn about self-pleasure through primary sources of early socialization, including school, parents, religious communities, peers, and media. I establish that the dominant discourse around female masturbation in the United States is silence. When this silence is disrupted, I argue that female masturbation is primarily depicted negatively: as a sin or a (secular) stigma. In the absence of many representations or discussions of female masturbation, I further contend that girls frequently draw on more general heteronormative discourses to make meaning of their solitary sexual feelings and experiences. Finally, I consider the power of the sexuality discourses that are both *present* and *absent* to shape girls understandings and experiences of self-pleasure, and ultimately to contribute to the normalization of a gender double standard for masturbation.

With the awareness that most girls are socialized to understand female masturbation as highly stigmatizing and sinful, and within a heteronormative framework, in Chapter 5 I examine the consequences that follow when girls internalize these messages. I demonstrate how dominant cultural discourses on self-pleasure often lead young women to engage in masturbatory self-policing and regulation, frequently resulting in emotional struggles and physical pains. Thus I illuminate the many ways that masturbation is *not* pleasurable for girls and young women. I argue that despite its private and ‘invisible’ nature, masturbation nonetheless can function as a tool of social control, and more specifically, gender oppression, by constraining girls and young women’s experience of sexual agency and subjectivity.

In Chapter 6 I explore the various ways that young women struggle to challenge and overcome the internalization of the sexuality discourses described in Chapters 4 and 5 in order to lay claim to their right to independent sexual pleasure. I consider the potential of the Internet, attending college, and “knowledgeable” peers to introduce young women to alternative discourses about female pleasure that contribute to the normalization of female masturbation as both a topic of conversation and a sexual behavior. Through my analysis of participants’ narratives about their ongoing struggles to feel comfortable with and enjoy masturbating, even after acquiring the intellectual knowledge that self-stimulation is healthy and normal for women, I establish that (self-) pleasure is a process. In this way, I demonstrate the importance of examining lived experiences of female masturbation

for developing a broader understanding of the role embodiment plays in how girls and young women experience sexual agency and subjectivity.

While in the previous chapters I demonstrated how female masturbation can operate as a tool of gender oppression, in Chapter 7 I show how female masturbation can also function as a tool of gender resistance and liberation. I analyze the positive consequences that follow for girls and young women when masturbation becomes more normalized on an intellectual and embodied level. I examine how development of an embodied sexual subjectivity through this normalization results in participants' gaining a stronger understanding of their capacity for pleasure and potential obstacles to pleasure. Then, I consider how the embodied knowledge gained through masturbation enables young women to feel more in control of their sexuality and comfortable claiming their rights to sexual pleasure and safety, either alone or with a partner. Lastly, I illustrate the importance of engaging in sexual self-exploration for acquiring an awareness of gender and sexual inequalities, and becoming more likely to advocate for and challenge these inequalities both on an individual and larger societal level.

Finally, in Chapter 8 I discuss the primary theoretical contributions of this research and how my findings relate to existing scholarship on gender, sexuality, agency, and pleasure. Then, I consider the potential practical implications of my findings for families, educators, health professionals, clergy, policy-makers, and activists, and present some strategies for breaking the silence around female (self-) pleasure in U.S. society. Finally, I ponder the many new questions raised by this project, and consider potential avenues for further investigation.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As explained in the previous chapter, the principal goal of this research is to interrogate the present and missing discourses around women and masturbation and the way that female masturbation has been given individual and social meaning in order to develop an understanding of the way that gender, power, and pleasure converge to influence young women's lives. I also consider the cultural implications of discourses, ideologies, and experiences related to self-pleasure for more general understandings of sexual subjectivity, agency, pleasure, and health for girls and young women.

Therefore, with the understanding that female masturbation is a complex, multifaceted, and simultaneously biological and social phenomenon, in this chapter I provide an overview of the major theoretical perspectives and existing literature relevant to this research. I begin by elaborating upon what it means to employ a positive sexual rights health framework. Next, I summarize some of the important recent theoretical debates among feminist researchers about the relationship between sexuality, pleasure, and health regarding such concepts as sexual subjectivity, sexual empowerment, sexual agency, and embodiment. Then, I comprehensively review the existing literature on female masturbation conducted both abroad and in the United States. Finally, I explain how my research will not only contribute to and strengthen existing understandings of female self-pleasure, but fill significant gaps in this research as well.

## Positive Sexual Rights Framework

In recent years researchers, educators, and policy-makers have begun to develop an updated model of sexual health that includes sexual pleasure as a right for all human beings. In fact, as of 2004 the World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual health as “a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality” that is “not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity,” but also “requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of pleasurable and safe experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence” (3). In this way, researchers have come to distinguish between negative and positive rights with regard to sexual health. *Negative rights* refer to “freedom from” sexual harm, while *positive rights* encompass the “freedom to” feel entitled to and claim sexual pleasure and the “freedom for” diverse expressions of sexuality (Chaffour 2009; Lottes 2013; Parker et al. 2004). While the study of negative sexual health rights, such as freedom from sexual violence and abuse, is widely accepted in the United States, significantly less support exists for researching and advocating for positive sexual health rights for women (Chaffour 2009; Parker et al. 2004). Yet, a minority of researchers, educators, and policy-makers do argue for the importance of approaching sexual health from a positive perspective in the United States and globally, by providing accurate and comprehensive sexual information to everyone (Impett, Muise, and Breines 2013; Oriel 2005a), expanding the boundaries of “normative” sexuality to include those individuals and groups who are often deemed either asexual or sexually deviant (based on attraction, behavior, age, and so on) (Bullough 2004;



Oriel 2005a), and re-conceptualizing physical pleasure as an essential human right (Bullough 2004; Oriel 2005b).

Just as generating knowledge about and advocating for women's negative rights to protection from sexual harm are feminist issues, so too is the case for women's positive rights to desire, claim, and experience sexual pleasure. Because men's sexual desires and pleasures often require the suppression and oppression of women's sexual desires and pleasures<sup>3</sup> (Oriel 2005b), it is particularly important to develop an understanding of the relationship between gender, power, and pleasure in order to consider how gender and sexual inequalities may contribute to disparities in sexual health between women and men, as well as how best to advocate for women's rights to lead safe and pleasurable sexual lives. Therefore, in recent years feminist researchers have begun to more closely examine the relationship between sexual pleasure and health for girls and young women in particular, debating how to define and conceptualize various aspects of female sexual health, such as sexual subjectivity, sexual empowerment, sexual agency, and embodiment.

### **Sexual Agency**

In accord with this move toward conceptualizing sexual health in terms of both negative and positive rights, a small but growing interdisciplinary feminist literature is emerging, which, while not ignoring the dangers, also explores the potential pleasures of female sexuality. These researchers view girls' and young

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<sup>3</sup> Dominant norms for (hetero)masculinity dictate that men be sexually assertive and forceful – that they physically “control” sexual encounters, and that all sexual activities revolve around their (penetrative) desires and pleasures.

women's struggles to develop sexual agency as an important part of this larger conversation about women's fight to gain access to such positive sexual health rights as sexual pleasure. While some theorists define agency solely as the *capacity* "to determine and act" on one's own, others argue that the *exercise* "of will and conscious action" is an essential component of agency (Albanesi 2010, 10; Messer-Davidow 1995, 25; White and Wyn 1998, 318). In this way, many scholars frame agency as dichotomous, as something that a person absolutely does or does not exercise or experience.

### **Sexual Subjectivity**

Defining *sexual subjectivity* as "a person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being," feminist researchers consider sexual subjectivity to be a significant component of agency (Tolman 2002, 5-6). Much of this research has centered on adolescence because it is a critical moment for establishing the building blocks for agency, subjectivity, and self-esteem. These researchers see "feeling like one can do and act" as a crucial factor in the sexual development of young women (11). In addition, these researchers recognize that studying sexual subjectivity requires an acknowledgement of contradictions and tensions young people encounter as they attempt to navigate and negotiate their sexual lives (Fields 2008, 172). Hence, they conceive of enactments and experiences of sexual agency and subjectivity not in absolute terms, but as multi-faceted and continuous.

This body of feminist research is rooted in the idea that the denial of an agentic sexual subjectivity to young women is reinforced through supposedly “legitimate” sources of sexual knowledge, such as the sexual education classroom, religious institutions, or discussions with parents. As referenced in the previous chapter, while boys consistently hear about their bodies as site of agency and sexual pleasure, girls must contend with a “missing discourse of desire” (Fields 2008; Fine 1998, 31-32). Ultimately, the absence of representations and discussions about female genital physiology and pleasure from these sources limits young women’s capacity to acquire “subjective body knowledge” – an internal, emotionally connected corporeal awareness (Martin 1996). Possession of this subjective body knowledge is important not only for the development of sexual subjectivity and the experience of sexual agency and embodied desire and pleasure, but for girls and young women to potentially recognize, resist, and overcome oppressive cultural ideologies (Lamb 2010; Schalet 2009).

### **Embodiment**

In this way, feminist researchers also conceptualize embodiment as an important component of sexual agency and subjectivity. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2001) distinguish between the passive female “sexualized body” which is often objectified and “acted upon,” and the “sexual body” which is capable of actually experiencing desire and pleasure (101). Thus, they define “sexual embodiment” as the capacity to experience one’s sexuality beyond the “performance of sexual desirability,” in a way *not* “abstracted from mind, self, and social context.”

Accordingly, feminist scholars define “disembodiment” as “a separation between the

self and physical sensations,” where emotions and bodily feelings are alienated from one another (Martin 2001, 87). They emphasize that a body that appears “sexy” to others, that performs desire and pleasure, is not necessarily experienced as “sexual” (Jackson and Scott 2001). Such a disconnect between the sexual body and mind can result in girls and young women experiencing their bodies as “silent” or “confused,” where they do not feel desire on an embodied level, do not realize if they feel desire, or resist their feelings of desire (Tolman 2002, 47-48).

Consistent with feminist scholars’ emphasis on the importance of connecting intellectual sexual knowledge with bodily feelings for the experience of sexual subjectivity, Jackson and Scott discuss sexual embodiment in terms of the “experienced body” (in contrast to the “experiencing body”), as one in which a woman possesses a clear awareness of what it means to experience pleasure and pain through her body. Hence, the experience of female sexual embodiment can be understood as experiencing oneself as a sexual being and feeling a strong connection between one’s sexual mind and body, as well as the process and experience of acquiring *embodied sexual knowledge* – learning firsthand through bodily experience what it means to *feel* sexual desire and pleasure (and pain). Embodied sexual knowledge is distinct from Martin’s concept of “subjective body knowledge” discussed above, which refers to how being provided with information and representations illustrating the possibilities for how sexual bodies look and function may help girls and young women to mentally connect what they are learning with their own bodies (e.g. to view an image of female genitalia and subsequently alter the perception of one’s own genitalia). In contrast, embodied

sexual knowledge extends further, referring to the bodily sexual knowledge that can only be acquired through experience (e.g. what it feels like to orgasm).

### **The Sexual Empowerment Debates**

While feminist researchers across a variety of disciplines agree that interrogating both the possibilities and limitations for girls' and young women's exercise and experience of sexual empowerment is important for understanding how they do or do not develop an agentic sexual subjectivity, they nonetheless disagree as to what it means for a girl or young women to experience sexual empowerment. The primary debate revolves around whether *feeling* agentic or empowered is the same as *being* agentic or empowered (Lamb and Peterson 2012). How do we reconcile the notion that young women may feel that they are acting autonomously, with the idea that this supposed "choice" is really restricted by regulatory sexuality discourses and traditional gender ideologies? While some researchers argue that *feeling* sexually empowered is not equivalent to *being* sexually empowered (Lamb 2010), others believe that writing off girls' and young women's feelings of sexual empowerment (even if influenced by patriarchal discourses) as "false consciousness" invalidates girls and young women's subjective feelings and experiences (Peterson 2010).

Furthermore, while some researchers view sexual subjectivity, agency, and empowerment as a "set of capacities ... which girls have a right to bring into ... their explorations of sexuality" (Tolman 2012, 750), others highlight some potential drawbacks of valorizing these constructs. For example, some express concern that focusing on the "resistor" girl who is sexually confident and assertive, experiences

embodied desire, and feels a strong entitlement to sexual pleasure unintentionally sets up a new sexual mandate and body project for girls and young women which is almost impossible to achieve (Allen 2012; Lamb 2010; Peterson and Lamb 2012). Still others question whether subjectively empowered sexual experiences that result in negative, non-pleasurable outcomes (e.g. pregnancy, being labeled as a “slut” by peers) can be easily summarized as non-agentic (Allen 2012; Lamb and Peterson 2012). They contend that a negative sexual outcome should *not* completely overrule a girl or young women’s original intentions or subjective feelings of empowerment.

Debates have also ensued regarding the relationship between sexual pleasure and empowerment. The experience of sexual pleasure has generally been conceived as an indicator of empowerment and a more egalitarian relationship (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003), with some researchers and policy-makers suggesting that helping women develop an entitlement to sexual pleasure and to feel empowered to take active steps to claim that right can empower women in other aspects of their lives (e.g. financially, politically) (Knerr and Philpott 2009). Although, some feminist researchers warn of the dangers of this assumption, suggesting that because women often engage in sexual relations for a variety of sexual and non-sexual reasons (e.g. to elevate social status, to feel attractive or loved, to get pregnant), as well as may experience pleasure in seemingly oppressive sexual situations (e.g. after being coerced into engaging in sex by a partner), it may be “too simplistic to equate sexual pleasure with the exercise of agency or proof of empowerment” (Allen 2012, 457; Lamb and Peterson 2012).

Another question that arises in this debate is how do we identify the extent to which embodiment is necessary for the experience or enactment of a fully agentic sexuality? While some scholars believe that the psychological experience of empowerment qualifies as *being* empowered, Sharon Lamb (2010) argues that solely feeling sexually confident and assertive is not enough, that a sense of embodiment is also required for girls and young women to experience their sexuality as fully agentic. While feeling as if one possesses sexual choices and the capacity to actively choose among them is a crucial aspect of empowerment, Lamb and Peterson (2012) contend that this is not sufficient for a girl or young woman to *be* empowered. In the same vein, Maxwell and Aggleton (2011) suggest that (partnered) bodily sexual experiences play an important role in facilitating girls' experience of sexual agency by increasing their sexual confidence and knowledge, as well as their comfort to "embrace" their sexuality (316).

The question then becomes, how do we study or "measure" such abstract concepts? How do we, as feminist researchers, determine whether sexual subjectivity, agency, or empowerment is actually being enacted or experienced for a given individual or in a given context without simultaneously denying participants that very same agency? Nicola Gavey (2012) suggests that one solution may be for researchers to shift their focus beyond individual or context-specific empowerment and to think more broadly about cultural constraints and possibilities for girls' and young women's sexuality, bodies, and pleasure. In addition, Zoë Peterson (2010) introduces the idea of "ambivalent empowerment," suggesting that one way to avoid falling into the trap of labeling a girl or young women as wholly sexually

empowered or disempowered is to consider sexual empowerment as continuous and multidimensional (309). In this way, sexual empowerment could be conceptualized as a potentially life-long journey, as a “long-term developmental process in which girls experience degrees of sexual empowerment” with no ultimate goal or endpoint (310). Researchers could develop a more nuanced understanding of female sexual empowerment, as girls and young women could be considered to experience sexual empowerment on some levels, but not on others, to simultaneously feel both empowered and disempowered.

### **Sexual Empowerment, Pleasure, and Safety**

A small pool of research suggests that the restriction of young women’s access to discourses that may facilitate their acquiring of essential sexual body knowledge may have serious potential physical repercussions for sexual safety, relating to adolescent pregnancy, HIV transmission, and rape. Holland and Ramazanoglu (1992) emphasize the importance of empowering women to seek sexual pleasure and engage in safer sex practices. They insist that “safer sex for young women constitutes a challenge to the ideas, identities, expectations and practices of men” (6). To this end, they argue that women with “self-respecting sexual identities” will be in a “stronger position to promote sexual safety” (5). Ultimately, they contend that there may be a number of practical applications to empowering women in a sexual context, including increasing their ability to say “no,” engaging in safer sex practices, negotiating sexual activities which are pleasurable to the woman, masturbating, and developing an autonomous identity as a sexual subject.



Hogarth and Ingham's (2009) research shows how young women who express awareness of their personal pleasure also often feel a sense of empowerment to expect it. The sense of control derived from knowing and wanting sexual pleasure grants many young women the power to make decisions over their own desires and needs, rather than participate in activities based on others' wants which they may later regret. When constructing an updated sexual health model for teenage girls, Tolman, Striepe, and Harmon (2003) also incorporated "being able to feel one's own sexual feelings, resisting objectifying sex and oneself, and feeling entitled to sexual experiences and pleasure, including self-pleasure, without guilt" as essential components (8). Thus, according to Tolman (2002), "not feeling sexual desire may put girls in danger and 'at risk'" because when a girl is mentally disconnected from what is happening in her own body, she can become particularly vulnerable to the power of others, as well as to their opinions about what she "wants" (21).

### **Female Masturbation Research**

Researchers have largely ignored the topic of female masturbation. Notable exceptions are the studies conducted by Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson, and Shere Hite in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s respectively. Not only did these studies suggest that most women in the United States do masturbate, but these researchers understood that a comprehensive understanding of female masturbation from both a biological and psychological perspective was critical to unlocking the secrets of women's sexual attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, not only did these researchers illuminate the importance of the academic study of female

desire and pleasure, but their findings also helped to challenge what Anne Koedt (1973) refers to as the “myth of the vaginal orgasm” – the societal misconception that orgasm resulting from vaginal penetration is the most “natural” and pleasurable form of female orgasm – as well as to advocate for the potential physical and psychological benefits of female masturbation. Thus, these three landmark studies have provided the primary basis for research on female sexuality and masturbation worldwide.

Hite’s (1976) work in particular highlighted the importance of approaching the study of female sexuality and pleasure from a feminist perspective. She understood the broader significance of women’s private sexual experiences for illuminating larger social inequalities, that “a woman’s place in sex mirrors her place in the rest of society” (Hite 1976, xi). Therefore, she advocated for actually asking women about their lived experiences of sexuality. What is more, she divorced masturbation from partnered sex in her research, instead conceptualizing women as independent sexual beings. Ultimately, Hite’s open-ended (rather than multiple-choice) questionnaire encouraged women to share their individual feelings and experiences of self-pleasure, illuminating the diversity of motivations, methods, and meanings various women associate with masturbation.

Despite the significant knowledge gained as a result of these groundbreaking studies, there is a dearth of recent research that examines women’s perspectives, feelings, and experiences of self-pleasure. What is more, few researchers since Hite have specifically sought to illuminate the meaning and experience of masturbation for women from a qualitative perspective. In this section I present the small body of

quantitative and qualitative work on women and masturbation that does exist both in the United States and abroad.

### **Gender Differences in Self-Pleasure**

Much of the existing research on masturbation has examined gender differences between men and women. While exact percentages vary between studies, most find that more men (than women) masturbate and that they masturbate more *often* in comparison with women (Arafat and Cotton 1974; Oliver and Hyde 1993; Petersen and Hyde 2011; Pinkerton, Bogart, Cecil, and Abramson 2013; Smith, Rosenthal, and Reichler 1996). They also find that women rely more on their partner's approval of their masturbation (Kaestle and Allen 2011), experience more stigma (Kaestle and Allen 2011) and depression (Arafat and Cotton 1974) associated with masturbation, and possess a more negative attitude toward masturbation in comparison with men (Kaestle and Allen 2011).

### **Female Masturbation and Partnered Sex**

Other studies have sought to investigate the relationship between female masturbation and partnered sex. Research has found that adult women who achieve orgasm through self-stimulation possess greater sexual desire (Hurlbert and Whittaker 1991), require less time to arousal (Hurlbert and Whittaker 1991), achieve orgasm more frequently during intercourse (Jeff and Israel 1983), experience greater marital and sexual satisfaction (Hurlbert and Whittaker 1991), and have a greater preference for clitoral stimulation as a means of achieving orgasm (Hurlbert and Whittaker 1991; Jeff and Israel 1983) in comparison with women who do not masturbate or who masturbate but do not experience orgasm

through self-stimulation. It is important to note that these studies generally consist solely of heterosexual, married women who have engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse. In addition, “masturbation” is often narrowly defined in such research as the achievement of orgasm through self-stimulation (Hurlbert and Whittaker 1991), ignoring the possibility that women might engage in self-stimulation that does not result in orgasm.

Data on the relationship between masturbation and sexual intercourse among adolescent girls differs from that of adult women. Smith, Rosenthal, and Reichler’s (1996) research suggests that there is *not* a relationship between masturbation prevalence or frequency and engaging in sexual intercourse for adolescent girls and boys. Although, their findings do indicate that there is a positive relationship between masturbating and sexual self-esteem. It is important to note that the majority of the findings are generalized to both sexes in this study, so the specific relationship between female masturbation and sexual intercourse for adolescent girls is unclear. Additionally, this is not a longitudinal study of causality, and demonstrates only that such outcomes are correlated with one another.

### **Female Masturbation and Health**

The majority of established research on women and masturbation that does not focus on gender differences or how it relates to partnered sex are quantitative, based on small homogenous samples, and focused on the correlation of psychological or physical health outcomes.

**Negative Outcomes.** These studies largely seek to demonstrate that many women today feel guilty about masturbating (Greenberg and Archambault 1973;

Kelley 1985; Sharma and Sharma 1998). Others tend to associate female masturbation with sexual deviance or an “excessive” sexuality by linking masturbation prevalence and frequency with sexual promiscuity, HIV risk, or non-procreative sexual activities, such as oral, anal, or homosexual sex (Coleman, Hoon, and Hoon 1983; Das 2007; Gerressu et al. 2008; Herold and Way 1983; Davidson and Moore 1994; Robinson, Bockting, and Harrell 2002; Træen, Stigum, and Sørensen 2002; Pinkerton, Bogart, Cecil, and Abramson 2013). Two more recent large-scale nationally representative sexuality studies (Herbenick et al. 2009; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994) have examined masturbation in adult women more broadly, considering how various social factors such as education, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and marital status might influence related psychological constructs. However, the data from these projects is still solely quantitative, and thus the findings are limited to pre-established, rigid measures. Associating female masturbation primarily with potential negative physical and psychological consequences or risks generally related to partnered sex, this pool of research largely ignores the complexity of women’s attitudes, experiences, and meanings of masturbation.

**Positive Outcomes.** Only a few studies exist which explicitly examine the relationship between female masturbation and sexual safety. Some consider how masturbating affects reproductive health factors for women, such as contraceptive use and abortion (Kelley 1979; Mosher and Vonderheide 1985). These studies have found that attitudes toward the use of contraceptives which involve manual genital manipulation such as a diaphragm, condom, intrauterine device, or vaginal foam and

having an abortion may be positively correlated with feelings about masturbation (Kelley 1979), and negatively correlated with masturbation guilt (Mosher and Vonderheide 1985). However, Davidson and Moore's (1994) subsequent research suggests that heterosexual women who have engaged in intercourse but do not masturbate are more likely to have used contraceptives at first intercourse and to report fewer lifetime partners in comparison to women who masturbate and have engaged in intercourse. In a more recent nationally representative study, Herbenick et al. (2011) examined the relationship between female sex toy use and sexual health. They found that vibrator users were not only less likely to experience sexual pain, but that they were significantly more likely to have had a gynecological exam in the past year and to have performed a genital self-examination during the previous month. In contrast to the studies that associate women's masturbation with negative health outcomes, these studies suggest that the bodily knowledge and comfort women gain through masturbation might increase their capacity to engage in positive health behaviors.

### **Female Masturbation and Body Attitudes**

Little research explicitly explores the relationship between female masturbation and the body. Existing studies indicate that there is a positive relationship between masturbation and general body image or satisfaction for women (Shulman and Horne 2003; Wiederman and Pryor 1997), suggesting that bodily revulsion and hatred may be associated with decreased genital self-pleasuring. All the same, these findings are limited to very specific populations,

including bulimic women (Wiederman and Pryor 1997) and white women (Shulman and Horne 2003).

Positive genital self-image has also recently been found to significantly relate to higher frequencies of masturbation among women (Herbenick et al. 2011). Fahs' (2011b) recent qualitative research on women and menstrual sex supports this assertion, as Fahs found that women possessing a positive attitude about menstrual sex tended to experience more positive experiences with masturbation in comparison with those who possessed negative attitudes about menstrual sex, suggesting that both of these things may be associated with more general positive attitudes about their bodies. Additionally, Schick, Calabrese, Rima, and Zucker's (2010) finding that greater dissatisfaction with genital appearance was associated with higher genital image self-consciousness during partnered intimacy, and lower sexual esteem, satisfaction, and motivation to avoid risky behavior, as well as Berman et al.'s (2003) finding that positive genital self-image positively correlates with sexual desire<sup>4</sup>, suggests that negative genital perceptions might have a negative impact on young women's experience of sexual agency and pleasure in their solitary sexual behaviors as well.

### **Female Masturbation and Sex Toy Use**

A small pool of literature that examines women's sex toy use, attitudes, and experiences has also emerged in recent years. Based on the findings of a recent nationally representative study, Herbenick et al. (2011) suggest that women with

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<sup>4</sup> The sample for Berman et al.'s (2003) study consists solely of women seeking treatment for sexual dysfunction.

positive beliefs about vibrator use may also experience higher levels of sexual functioning, including arousal, lubrication, orgasm, satisfaction, and lack of pain. This and other research suggests that many women use sex toys both alone and with a partner (Davis, Blank, Lin, and Bonillas 1996; Fahs and Swank 2013; Herbenick et al. 2009), with most women reporting that they prefer using a sex toy to stimulate their clitoris over vaginal penetration (Davis, Blank, Lin, and Bonillas 1996; Fahs and Swank 2013; Herbenick et al. 2009), and that their orgasms achieved through stimulation with a sex toy are more “intense” than those achieved by other means (Davis, Blank, Lin, and Bonillas 1996). These studies also suggest that there is a great deal of diversity in how women engage with (e.g. position, level of pressure) and make meaning of sex toy use (e.g. naming one’s sex toy) (Davis, Blank, Lin, and Bonillas 1996; Fahs and Swank 2013). For example, Fahs and Swank’s (2013) recent qualitative research suggests that even though most women do not penetrate themselves with phallic sex toys, they still feel compelled to include men or a phallus in their solitary sexual experiences as a result of internalized patriarchal discourses. As the same time, they feel embarrassed for possessing and using a sex toy at all, and thus work hard to keep it hidden. Finally, Fahs and Swank’s findings also suggest that not all women have exclusively positive experiences with sex toys, whether partnered or alone.

### **Female Masturbation and Identity**

Research on female masturbation and various aspects of identity is scant. The samples for most studies on female self-pleasure consist primarily of educated, white, heterosexual, sexually experienced, and sex-positive women. What is more,



the studies that do exist often employ a between-group comparative approach, often intentionally (and sometime unintentionally) discussing differences in masturbation prevalence and frequency in a way that “Others” particular identity groups, such as African-American, religiously observant, and lesbian and bisexual women.

**Race.** Little research exists that examines female masturbation in non-white populations. The few studies which consider racial differences in female masturbation experience in the United States have generally found that white women are more likely to report masturbating than other racial groups, including black women (Bancroft, Long, and McCabe 2011; Das 2007; Fisher 1980; Robinson, Bockting, and Harrell 2002; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994; Shulman and Horne 2003; Wyatt, Peters, and Guthrie 1988) and Asian/Pacific Islander women (Das 2007).

**Religion.** There is a dearth of research on masturbation and religion. Only a few studies have considered differences in masturbation attitudes, prevalence, and frequency among women of varying religions and degrees of religious observance. For example, several studies suggest that religious involvement may significantly reduce incidences of masturbation for women, while having little effect on men (Das 2007; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard 1953; Pedersen 2013). While Bergstrom-Walan and Nielsen (1990) did not find a significant relationship between masturbation and religion for women, Pederson’s (2013) more recent research suggests that this is indeed the case for Nordic Christian men and women. Davidson, Darling, and Norton (1995), however, found no significant differences concerning

masturbation prevalence for women based on frequency of church attendance or religious affiliation.

Several researchers have also found a relationship between religion and masturbation guilt for women. While Greenberg and Archaumbault (1973) found that Catholics were less likely to report masturbating in comparison with Protestants and Jews, they did not find a significant difference in frequency of masturbation among those who did report masturbating between these religions. On the other hand, Davidson, Darling, and Norton (1995), found that masturbation guilt was related to frequency of church attendance, that women who attended church at least on a monthly basis were more likely to view masturbation as a sin and to be ashamed to admit to masturbating.

While there has been some research on general attitudes about masturbation (Sidi et al. 2013) and men's experiences in particular religiously conservative populations (Malan and Bullough 2005; Smith 1976), little research has considered women's prevalence and experience of masturbation in such communities. The research that does exist suggests that fundamentalist protestant (Das 2007) and Mormon (LDS) women (Raines, Stewart, and Pett 1995) do masturbate, but at lower rates than those women with no religious affiliation or who identify as moderate Protestant. Based on a small convenience sample of married women, Raines, Stewart, and Pett's (1995) research indicates that Mormon (LDS) women masturbate less once they get married in comparison with when they were younger.

Because these studies are based on women's self-reports of masturbation experience, the accuracy of claims regarding differences in masturbation prevalence

and frequency between religious groups is questionable. Given the religious stigma associated with masturbation, it is important to consider the likelihood that religious women under-report their masturbation experience, as well as downplay the frequency with which they do masturbate, to a higher extent than non-religious or atheist women.

**Sexual Identity.** The minimal research which considers sexual identity and female masturbation consistently indicates that lesbian and bisexual women are more likely than heterosexual women to masturbate (Gerressu et al. 2008; Herbenick et al. 2010; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994), masturbate often (Burlison, Trevathan, and Gregory 2002; Traaen, Stigum, and Sorenson 2002), use a sex toy (Herbenick et al. 2010), and experience orgasm and satisfaction during masturbation (Bressler and Lavender 1986; Coleman, Hoon, and Hoon 1983; Iasenza 2002; Schreurs and Buunk 1996). Coleman, Hoon, and Hoon's (1983) finding that no lesbian respondents expressed preferring a dildo to reach orgasm over a partner's mouth, tongue, or fingers suggests that in contrast to heterosexual women, lesbian women's higher reliance on clitoral, rather than vaginal, stimulation might result in higher satisfaction and orgasm in contrast to heterosexual women (Bressler and Lavender 1986; Iasenza 2002; Schreurs and Buunk 1996). In addition, Fahs and Swank's (2013) recent qualitative research on women's experiences with sex toys indicates that women who identify as queer are frequently better able than heterosexual women to conceptualize sex toy use as subversive, fun, and shame-free. Hence, this research suggests that dominant heteronormative ideologies about sex and pleasure may inhibit heterosexual women's ability to experience emotional

and physical satisfaction through masturbation in a way that does not affect LGBTQ women.

### **International Studies on Female Masturbation**

While historically much of the research on women and masturbation has taken place in the United States, researchers in Europe, Asia, and Africa have increasingly engaged with this topic over recent years. Similar to U.S. studies, international studies find that women who have same sex partners (Gerressu et al. 2008; Traaen, Stigum, and Sorensen 2002), have higher levels of education and social class (Gerressu et al. 2008), and who are white are more likely to report masturbating in contrast to other groups of women (Gerressu et al. 2008). Men also consistently report possessing more permissive attitudes toward masturbation (Sidi et al. 2013) and masturbating more than women in these studies (Berstrom-Walan and Nielsen 1990; Pederson 2013). Also consistent with much U.S.-based work, research on women and masturbation in other countries suggests a relationship between female masturbation and greater sexual repertoire or sexualization (Carvalheira and Leal 2012; Das, Parish, Laumann 2009) and greater ease in reaching sexual arousal and orgasm (Carvalheira and Leal 2012).

International researchers have sought to investigate novel aspects of women's experiences of self-pleasure, contributing significant new knowledge regarding about how women understand and make meaning of their masturbation experiences largely not addressed or discovered in U.S.-based research in recent years. In a study of masturbation experiences among unmarried, heterosexual, virgin, first year college-students in India, for example, Sharma and Sharma (1997)

found that girls who had a more educated mother, possessed a high overall knowledge of human sexuality, and who were not living at home were more likely to masturbate. Of course, another possibility is that these girls were simply more comfortable and willing to report that they masturbate in comparison with other girls. Based on these findings, Sharma and Sharma contend that within the more sexually repressive Indian social climate, advocating for female masturbation among girls may actually assist in upholding cultural standards regarding premarital chastity by alleviating adolescent sexual tensions.

Another example, Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (2002) conducted a cross-generational and cross-cultural study of masturbation attitudes and activities in Finland, Sweden, Estonia, and Russia that indicates that each new generation has been more active in masturbation than the previous one. They also found that significant increases in rates of female masturbation occurred thirty to forty years later in Estonia and Russia than in Finland and Sweden. Hence, this research illustrates the context-specific nature of masturbation, how broader social ideologies (e.g. communism) may shape individual women's masturbation attitudes and experiences.

More recently, Hogarth and Ingham (2009) utilized a qualitative approach to explore the meaning of masturbation to a small sample of heterosexual, non-“virgin,” adolescent girls in the United Kingdom. The researchers sought to examine how these girls report their experiences of masturbation and how they relate to other aspects of their sexual activity. They found that girls who possessed a positive view of female masturbation associated masturbation with more positive feelings,

were more comfortable talking about sex in general, experienced more open communication with their parents about sex, and discussed desire and pleasure in their narratives. In contrast, those girls who had never thought about masturbation before or who had attempted it and not found it fulfilling tended to talk about their sexuality in terms of their boyfriend's needs and pleasures and did not express enjoyment or excitement about sex. Finally, those girls who possessed a negative view of female masturbation primarily associated it with negative characteristics and feelings, spoke in terms of their body being the "property of boys," and did not refer to desire or pleasure in their narratives (561-562).

Recent research in China also has shed some important new light on how women talk about and make meaning of their masturbation experiences. Das, Parish, and Laumann's (2009) quantitative findings suggest that women do not solely masturbate as a substitute for partnered sex, but as a complement to sex with a partner as well. In a different qualitative study, Yuxin and Ying (2009) found that women talk about and make meaning of masturbation in a variety of ways, with some being quite comfortable to speak about their masturbation experience and with others avoiding talking about their personal masturbation experiences altogether. They also interrogated some of the reasons women do *not* masturbate, including the belief that women should only receive pleasure from a male partner and that masturbation is only "necessary" when one is not available. Yuxin and Ying also found that women in Shanghai masturbate for many different reasons, including to satisfy their sexual needs in order to preserve their virginity or when their partner is unavailable, as a form of self-love and care, and to enhance

partnered intimacy. In this way, these Chinese women “acquired and created, through their own sexual practices, new knowledge about themselves, their bodies, sex, womanhood, femininity, sexual relationships and marriage” (521). In the end, Yuxin and Ying conclude that a discourse of masturbation as a healthy and normal behavior for women has become common in Shanghai, but that many women still lack the language to discuss self-pleasure with others openly.

Similarly, Carvalheira and Leal’s (2012) recent project in Portugal demonstrates that women masturbate for a variety of reasons, including to cope with stress, to fall asleep, and to achieve sexual satisfaction when a partner is not available. They found that women employ diverse techniques to masturbate, including such direct stimulation methods as clitoral stimulation, vaginal penetration, water pressure, and indirect methods such as squeezing the thighs and pressing one’s genitals against a pillow. As such indirect methods (which do not involve directly touching one’s genitalia) were primarily employed by younger women in the sample, and 17 to 26 year-olds most commonly experienced masturbation-related shame, the researchers suggest that perceived stigmas around female masturbation might decline with age.

### **U.S.-Based Feminist Research on Women’s Lived Experiences of Self-Pleasure**

While there are several recent feminist studies on female masturbation that have been conducted abroad, to date there are only two U.S.-based studies that have sought to explicitly examine women’s lived experiences of self-pleasure from a feminist perspective. The first is Christin Bowman’s forthcoming research (2014) on sex-positive women’s experiences of masturbation as a form of sexual

empowerment. In contrast to many psychological studies which conceptualize sexual empowerment as something which can be experienced solely in an interpersonal, partnered context, Bowman defines sexual empowerment in terms of feeling entitled to and able to experience pleasure whether partnered or alone. Even though she employs a quantitative psychological approach, she sought to understand *why* sex-positive women masturbate and how it makes them *feel* sexually empowered from a feminist theoretical perspective. Despite the limitations of working with pre-established psychological constructs, she was able to determine that women may be more likely to experience masturbation as sexually empowering if they are more sexually efficacious (that is, possess confidence in their ability to exert control over their desires and behaviors), possess a higher genital self-image, and masturbate for sexual pleasure or to learn more about their bodies (rather than masturbating as a release, a substitute for partnered sex, or because of general sexual dissatisfaction).

My recent research with Breanne Fahs (Fahs and Frank 2014) based on the narratives of 20 adult women is the only feminist research conducted in the United States which qualitatively examines women's lived experiences of masturbation, asking *why* they masturbate and how it makes them *feel*. On the one hand, we found that the silence around female masturbation offered some women the freedom to masturbate in whatever way feels good without concerns about their sexual normalcy – as routine tension release or simply a source of joy and fun, for example. On the other hand, in the absence of a script for female masturbation, we noted that women often draw on traditional patriarchal ideologies about sex and pleasure to



make meaning of their masturbation experiences. For instance, we found that many women view female masturbation as a threat to male dominance, assume that most women self-penetrate (even if they do not), and find that achieving orgasm during masturbation often becomes a form of “work” and stress. Hence, our research suggests that broader gender and sexuality inequalities may be reproduced in and through women’s private solitary sexual experiences.

### **Conclusion**

As demonstrated in this chapter, while much theoretical debate has ensued about defining such terms as sexual health, subjectivity, agency, and empowerment over the last several years, little empirical research has been conducted in this area. What has emerged from these debates, however, is a call for more up-to-date feminist research which develops and discovers methodological “release points” – new ways for describing, interrogating, and theorizing the complexities of the lived experiences of sexuality for girls and young women from diverse backgrounds (McClelland and Fine 2008a; McClelland and Fine 2008b, 96-97; Tolman 2012), studies healthy sexual development in a positive sexual rights context (beyond physical sexual risk) (Murnen and Smolak 2012), investigates relationships between cultural discourses and the development of sexual attitudes and behaviors (Murnen and Smolak 2012), and examines how cultural practices that advance heteronormative ideals constrain sexual empowerment for both heterosexual and LGBTQ youth (Gavey 2012; Murnen and Smolak 2012; Tolman 2012).

This dissertation responds to these researchers’ imperatives, as well as the striking absence of U.S.-based qualitative work on female masturbation, by

investigating young women and girls' lived experiences of solitary pleasure from a feminist ethnographic perspective. By so doing, I address a number of significant gaps and weaknesses in existing research on young women, female (self-) pleasure, sexual agency, and health. By framing my research in terms of girls' and young women's possibilities for independent pleasure (rather than partnered danger), I conceptualize girls and young women as sexual agents (rather than asexual victims). Accordingly, I am able to consider the importance of the relationship between pleasure and health for girls and young women's experiences of sexual subjectivity and safety.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK, DESIGN, AND ANALYSIS

The promise of feminist ethnography is that we can elicit accounts and produce descriptions of ... practice and thought that are part of female consciousness but left out of dominant interpretive frames, shaped around male concerns. When this kind of topic construction is successful, we recognize the thinking that emerges from the analysis – we know the experience – but we are also surprised and learn something new. The analysis produces the ‘aha’ or ‘click’ of consciousness-raising that has been central to the development of feminist thinking, and that serves as a pointer toward a new way of seeing the world. – Marjorie L. Devault (2004, 232)

Complex questions like those enumerated in the introductory chapter can only be adequately explored within a feminist ethnographic research project that embraces the nuances, complexities, and contradictions of sexuality, power, and pleasure. As shown in the previous chapter, past research on female masturbation is generally quantitative and almost exclusively published in medical and psychological journals. In contrast, my research challenges the historical legacy of pathologizing women’s desires and pleasures by actually *asking* women about their feelings and experiences with regards to a usually hidden topic. By grounding my research in the lived experiences of actual women, and then examining their personal experiences in the context of larger societal discourses, I attempt to give voice to women and perspectives that have previously been silenced. Moreover, I hold myself accountable to my research subjects by valuing and validating their perspectives and experiences (Fonow and Cook 2005; Wylie 2007), and by framing their sexuality as healthy and important, rather than a “problem.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, because feminist authors have increasingly viewed terms such as sexual subjectivity and sexual agency as a

continuum rather than a binary state, in this research I explore these concepts as dialectic – I locate possibilities *and* limitations, spaces of oppression *and* resistance. Like so, I consider sexual agency and empowerment as contextual and multi-faceted processes. Similar to Lynn Phillips’s (2000) approach to researching young women’s development of subjectivities and experiences in hetero-relations, I acknowledge the situatedness of culturally constructed messages and experiences as part of my quest to uncover the multiple layers of meaning in young women’s experiences, honoring the wrinkles and paradoxes that may exist at the point where female masturbation intersects with gender and power. Furthermore, as “silences are an integral part of strategies that underlie and permeate discourses,” examining absences and what is *not* present in individual narratives and larger discourses is just as important as examining what is present (Foucault 1976, 27). Accordingly, it is equally important to explore young women’s experiences with exercising sexual agency, and their experiences feeling as if they have no sexual agency, or facing obstacles to expressing that agency.

Given the large pool of existing research that solely examines the ‘visible’ or ‘tangible’ aspects of young women’s sexuality, I embrace the more ‘messy’, ‘intangible’, and seemingly ‘invisible’ aspects of female sexuality in my research. In contrast to traditional social science, education, and public health research that tends to focus on the more ‘tangible’ consequences of young female sexuality, I attempt to research what Davina Cooper (2009) refers to as “immeasurable” aspects of sexuality, such as feelings and emotions relating to sexual desire, pleasure, and power (275). By collecting multiple sources of data on what is clearly a “messy”

topic, I respond to Carol Smart's (2009) imperative for methods to be developed "which can grasp the mess and find ways to represent messiness without forcing a coherence and kind of logic onto lived experience" (296). By formulating a unique feminist methodology that leaves room for fluidity and the "messiness" of emotions and feelings, I represent the complexity and importance of female masturbation to individual women and our larger society, while simultaneously maintaining a systematic approach to the research. In addition to developing an understanding of young women's embodied (or *disembodied*) experiences of desire and pleasure, I interrogate how experiences of agency and empowerment, for example, are complicated by various conflicting and contradictory sexuality discourses.

In this chapter I provide the details of my methodological framework, research design, and analysis. I start by describing my recruitment process and data collection strategies for the group and one-on-one interviews and journals. I also present demographic information about my sample and consider its limitations. Lastly, I explain how I employed grounded theory as a feminist methodological approach to code and analyze the resulting data utilizing Nvivo software.

### **Research Design**

There are a number of challenges with conducting sexuality research. Because sexuality has historically been a taboo topic, it is difficult to find ways to collect accurate, representative data (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994). Due to the sensitivity of many sexual topics, quantitative research has traditionally been perceived as the best way to increase the validity and visibility of sexual research. Anonymous data collection methods such as online surveys are

often seen as easier and more reliable, given the perceived difficulty of recruiting participants for a study on a “taboo” or potentially morally offensive topic.

With regard to the study of masturbation in particular, researchers have frequently shied away from directly asking participants about self-pleasure. For example, in their nationally representative sexuality study, Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) collected data on a variety of potentially stigmatized sexual behaviors through an interviewer-administered questionnaire. Based on the *interviewers’* specific anxieties about asking participants about masturbation (which they did not feel with respect to asking about anal sex or same-sex partnered interactions), the researchers opted to gather all masturbation-related data through a self-administered questionnaire instead. Even in feminist researcher Sharon Lamb’s (2001) more recent qualitative research on the sexual lives of girls, she did not explicitly inquire about masturbation with child or adult participants unless they first broached the topic.

Because of these concerns about the validity of interview data on masturbation, I employed a triangulation approach, collecting data in a variety of ways and formats in the hopes of maximizing its overall quality and face validity. As in the “sexual justice” framework which Sara McClelland (2010) introduces as an alternative to existing paradigms for studying sexual satisfaction (which focus solely on psychological and physiological responses), part of this approach was to conceptualize the “individual as social agent” – to contextualize intimate, private experiences in a larger socio-political context (672-673). As McClelland proposes, I considered how personal meanings and experiences of sexual pleasure, as well as a

sense of entitlement to this pleasure, may be both constrained and facilitated by cultural discourses and other social influences. Similar to Meika Loe's (2004) research on the cultural phenomenon of Viagra, I sought to get at individual meanings and experiences through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, small focus groups, and sexual experience journals, and then situate this information in the context of relational and institutional processes.

I began my data collection with focus groups. These groups allowed me to observe how young women talk to *each other* about masturbation, a topic that would be unlikely to arise naturally in a public setting. The experience of facilitating the focus groups, as well as the data from them, helped me to develop more specific questions and themes to investigate and consider in one-on-one interviews and sexual experience journals. Three pilot interviews, which I conducted during the spring 2010 semester, were also useful in terms of developing the final interview schedule.

While one-on-one and group interviews provided me with the opportunity to ask direct questions to participants, as well as probe further when necessary, the journals provided me with a sense of young women's sexual experiences and perspectives over time. Additionally, while some interviewees felt shy or awkward responding to some sensitive questions in person or simply experienced difficulty recalling or explaining specific, contextual information, participants who completed journals were often able to be much more descriptive and detailed about specific masturbation or other sexual experiences.

## **Data Collection**

**Interviews and Focus Groups.** In this section I discuss my use of interviews and focus groups to collect data on discourses, feelings, and experiences related to female masturbation. I explain my recruitment strategy, sample, and protocol for each of these methods, including their limitations.

**Recruitment.** Participants for one-on-one formal interviews and focus groups were recruited simultaneously. I sought to recruit women between the ages of 18 and 29. Participants were recruited at Arizona State University (ASU) and University of Michigan – Ann Arbor. This was done through a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling techniques in order to include subjects of a range of racial/ethnic, class, religious, and sexuality backgrounds. I recruited through email and formal presentations in classrooms, student organizations, campus religious groups, and sororities, as well as through informal word-of-mouth networks (where participants passed on information about the study to other young women in their social networks). The study was advertised as being about “female sexuality.” No further detail was provided as to the specific nature of the research questions, as I did not want to limit the sample to only women who masturbate or who were comfortable and confident discussing their perceptions and experiences regarding masturbation. The primary reasons that I solely sought to recruit a college student population was that there are a number of avenues for recruitment (e.g. classrooms, campus organizations), and that it is convenient (and safer) to conduct interviews and focus groups on campus, in comparison with participants’ homes or other arbitrary locations. As masturbation was not a topic that I expected participants



would feel comfortable discussing openly in a public setting, such as a café or the library, conducting the interviews in a private on-campus conference room was clearly the best option. Pizza, cookies, and soda were offered as a recruitment incentive for focus groups. No incentive of any kind was offered or provided to one-on-one interview participants.

**Sample.** I conducted two focus groups at ASU in the spring 2012: one with a group of women who were strangers to each other, the other with a group of young women from the same Latina sorority. Each focus group consisted of six participants, for a total of twelve. With regard to the interviews, I aimed to recruit approximately 25 students each at ASU and the University of Michigan. During the spring 2012 I conducted 25 interviews at ASU, and another 26 interviews (because I overscheduled to account for potential no-shows) over that summer 2012 at the University of Michigan. While recruitment at the University of Michigan took place via list serves, several of the participants were not current students. Because I had concerns as to how many people would volunteer, especially since I was not offering any incentives for participation, all individuals who contacted me and met the age eligibility criteria were offered an opportunity to participate.

Rather than attempting to quantify, categorize, and compare various groups of women based on their sexual attitudes or behaviors and religious, racial, and sexual identities, I sought to provide young women from diverse backgrounds with the opportunity to share their perspectives, to illuminate both *commonalities* and *variations, within* and *between* various social groups and identities. Rather than singling out certain groups of young women as “deviant” or possessing a

“problematic” sexuality, my goal was to emphasize the impact of discourses and representations of female masturbation on the construction of sexual subjectivities and embodiment among young women. Differences that I do discuss serve primarily as a means for demonstrating the context-specific nature of masturbation, how the interaction between various intersecting identities (e.g. race, religion, sexual identity) shapes how individual young women understand and experience self-pleasure in very different ways. With that said, I attempted to recruit as diverse a population as possible in terms of religion, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation and experience.

*Religion.* Much feminist research examines the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, yet few consider religion as an important component. Given that present-day notions of masturbation (for men and women) as taboo are rooted largely in the historical religious doctrine and discourse related to the prohibition of masturbation, and the incredible diversity of religious perspectives and levels of observance in the United States today (and salience of these identities), religion is an important factor to consider with regards to developing an understanding of discourses and lived experiences of female masturbation. For this reason, I endeavored to recruit through courses and student organizations at ASU<sup>5</sup> and the University of Michigan<sup>6</sup> that served a variety of Christian and non-Christian religious groups.

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<sup>5</sup> American Religious Traditions, Adventist Students for Christ, All Saints Catholic Newman Center, Antioch Student Ministries, Arizona Korean Bible Study, Buddhists for Peace, Campus Crusade for Christ, Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship, Baptist Student Ministries, Christians on Campus, Communion and Liberation, Divine Youth Associations, Extreme Life College Ministries, Fellowship of Catholic

As I was distributing my recruitment flyer in an upper level “American Religious Traditions” course at ASU, I overheard a student whispering in the back of the classroom, “Why would she advertise about sexuality in a religion class?” Comments like these illustrate the extent to which young people in the United States view religion or religious individuals as inherently disconnected from sex or sexuality. This example speaks to the broader societal assumption that religion and sexuality are utterly incompatible – more so, that conservative or observant religious groups or individuals lack a “sexuality” or the possession of sexual feelings or desires. As described above, it is in the spirit of challenging this false assumption that I sought to illuminate the perspectives and experiences of young women from a variety of religious backgrounds and levels of observance, examining how dominant religious and secular societal discourses surrounding female sexuality shape their lives and experiences as sexual beings.

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University Students, Graduate Christian Fellowship, Hillel Jewish Student Center, International Bible Fellowship, Jewish Arizonans on Campus, Jews for Jesus, Latter-Day Saints Student Association, Lutheran Campus Ministry, Muslim Student’s Association, Orthodox Christian Fellowship, Saint Paul’s Outreach, Students for a Humanity Inspired by Ahlulbayt, Students for the Truth, Students Interested in Multi-Religious Discourse, Sun Devils for Christ, The Faithful City, Transcend, Bethel Campus Fellowship, Christian Challenge, Agape Christian Church, Hindu Yuva, and Muslim Law Students Association.

<sup>6</sup> Secular Student Alliance, Jewish Resource Center, La Briut Jewish Student Association, Adventist Students for Christ, Asian Christian Fellowship, Campus Chapel, Catholic Student Association, Chabad House, Christians on Campus, Dharma on Campus, Greek Intersarsity Christian Fellowship, H2O Campus Ministry, Hindu Students Council, Islamic Education Society, Islamic Relations Council, Islamic Society of Ahl-ul-bayt, LDS Business Student Association, Lutheran Campus Ministry, Michigan Atheist Student Society, MUJew, Muslim Students Association, Muslim Graduate Students Association, New Life Students, Sikh Student Association, Unitarian Universalist, University Christian Outreach, Wesley Foundation Campus Ministry, Muslim Business Students Association, Hillel, Hillel Arts, Kol Hakavod, Challah for Hunger, Interfaith Action, Jewish/Muslim Alternative Spring Break, Hillel Outdoor Adventure, J Street, and AEPi.

Due to this recruitment strategy, my sample for the one-on-one and group interviews consisted of young women who identify with one or more religions, as well as religiously unaffiliated individuals. Consistent with the national average, more participants currently identified as belonging to a U.S. Christian-based faith than any other (46.5%) (Kosmin and Keysar 2009), including Non-Denominational (12.7%), Catholic (11.3%), unspecified (5.6%), Church of Latter-Day Saints (LDS or Mormon) (7%), Baptist (2.8%), Episcopalian (1.4%), Evangelical (1.4%), Lutheran (1.4%), Methodist (1.4%) and Protestant (1.4%). Over one-third (36.7%) identified as currently religiously unaffiliated. This included individuals who described themselves as atheist, agnostic, non-religious, non-practicing, and spiritual.<sup>7</sup> Other religions represented in the sample include: Jewish (8.5%), Muslim (2.8%), Armenian Orthodox (1.4%), and Pagan (1.4%). A small percentage (2.8%) of the sample indicated that they currently identify with more than one religion.

*Race.* I also targeted organizations that largely served minority racial and ethnic groups or interests at both ASU<sup>8</sup> and the University of Michigan<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Some participants identified as belonging to a religion in a “cultural” sense, meaning that they feel a connection with their cultural heritage and other people who identify with their religion, as well as participate in cultural traditions (e.g. food, language, holidays). They do not necessarily subscribe to the core religious tenets of their culture, however, and often identify as atheist. For the purposes of this study, because they still identified as a part of a religious community (regardless of their level of observance), I categorized these individuals as “Jewish” or “Catholic,” for example, rather than “unaffiliated.”

<sup>8</sup> National Council of Negro Women, Las Hermanas de Hispanic Mother Daughter Program, Minority Ladies of the Sciences, African Students Association, American Indian Council, American Indian Graduate Student Association, Asian Business Leaders Association, Asian Students Association, Asian-Pacific American Student Association, Axe Capoeira, Bangladesh Students Association, Black and African Coalition, Black Business Students Association, Bridge of Japan-America, Caring for Internationals, Chinese English Language Bridge, Chinese Language Flagship Student Association, Chinese Students and Scholars Association, Chinese Undergraduate Student Association, Club Italiano, Coalition of International Students, Construction in Indian Country Student Organization,

Nonetheless, after examining the demographic characteristics of the first 51 participants, while they were religiously and sexually diverse, I found that the majority were white. That being the case, in the fall 2012 I conducted an additional round of recruitment at ASU, solely focused on women of color. I conducted eight additional interviews, four with women identifying as Latina or Hispanic, and four with women identifying as black or African-American. This reduced white

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Coya's Project Esperanza, El Concilio, Falun DaFa Association, French Club, Friends of Internationals, German Devils, Global Devils, Hawai'i and Pacific Islander Club, Indian Students Association, International PALS, International Students Club, Iranian Students Association, Japanese Media Society, Kazakhstan Student Association, Korean Student Association, Latina/o Graduate Student Alliance, Los Diablos, Malaysian Student Association, MEChA, Medabrim, Ms. Indian ASU Committee, Muskaan, Nepalese Students Association, Oceania, Indonesian Student Association, Philippine American Student Association, Qatari Student Association, Romanian Student Organization, Russian Student Association, Saudi Students Club, Sisters in Stride – Multicultural Women's Alliance, STEP Multicultural Honor Society, Students for Justice in Palestine, STARS, Sun Devils for Israel, Taiwanese Student Association, Lebanese Student Association, Tsinghua – ASU Alumni Club, Unified Society of South Asians, UAE Student Association, U.S. Iraqi Youth Association, Vietnamese Students Association, Black Graduate Student Association, Asian Pacific American Law Students Association, Black Law Students Association, Wise Latinas, Nursing Students for Ethnic and Cultural Diversity, Spanish Language and Cultures Club, African American Student Union – Polytechnic, Alianza Latina en Accion Social, Concilio Estudiantil de Lideres Latinos, Native American Student Organization, Otaku Club.

<sup>9</sup> A'subuhi Multicultural Council, African Students Association, Ann Arbor Japan House, Arab Organization, Arab Student Association, Asian American Association, Asian Drama Watching Club, Asian Pacific American Law Students Association, Asian Social Workers in Alliance Now, APSA, ALMA, Association of Black Social Work Students, Association of Multicultural Scientists, Baltic Club, Bengali Students Association, Bilateral, Black Business Students Association, Black Celebratory, Black Medical Association, BSPA, Black Welcome Week, Brazilian Student Association, Canadian Club, CGIS Ambassadors, C.A.S.A., Chinese American Cultural Association, European Student Association, Filipino American Student Association, Hispanic and Latino Business Students Association, Indian American Student Association, Indian Students Association, Ingenieros, Intercollegiate Taiwanese American Student Association, Intercultural Allies, Latin @ Social Work Coalition, LSPA, Latino Students Organization, Le Comite Francophone, Lebanese Students Association, Medical Students of Middle-Eastern Descent, Irish Club, Italian-American Association, NAACP, Native American Student Association, Pakistani Students Association, Poa Ambassadors, Persian Students Association, Public Health Students of African Descent, Black Student Union, Black Scholars and Professionals, Black Pre-Health Association, Project West Africa, Black Business Undergraduate Society, Black Law Undergraduate Association, Native American Law Student Association, Spanish Club, Tamid Israel Investment Group, Black Arts Council, American Indian Science and Engineering Society, National Society of Black Engineers, Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, Society of Asian Scientists and Engineers, Unified Minority Mechanical Engineers, Africaid, Arab/Jewish Intergroup Relations, Black Volunteer Network, Proyecto Advance, and Variasian.

participants to just over three-fifths (60.6%) of the final sample for one-on-one and group interviews. Overall, 20.0% identified as Latina, 8.5% as multi-racial, 5.6% as black or African-American, 2.8% as Arab-American, 1.4% as Indian, and 1.4% as Native American.

*Sexual Orientation.* Existing research on women and sexuality tends to be largely heteronormative, privileging heterosexuality as the most normal and natural form of sexuality. By focusing primarily on women's *partnered* pleasure with men, these studies render any forms of non-heterosexual identity or behavior invisible or non-normative. For this reason, I also purposely recruited through student organizations at ASU<sup>10</sup> and the University of Michigan<sup>11</sup> which appeal to the interests of LGBTQ individuals. As a result, almost one-quarter (21.1%) of the one-on-one and group interview sample identified as non-heterosexual, including individuals who defined themselves as lesbian, gay, or female-attracted (7.0%); bisexual (5.6%); queer (4.2%); asexual (2.8%); pansexual (1.4%); and unlabeled (1.4%).

*Virginity.* As a result of recruiting through such a variety of student organizations, my sample consisted of young women with varying degrees of sexual experience – those who *have* and *have not* engaged in partnered sex, as well as those who *have* or *have not* masturbated. Based on their own definitions of “virginity” and

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<sup>10</sup> Gamma Rho Lambda, Gender WHAT?!, and LGBTQ Coalition.

<sup>11</sup> B, G, L, and Allies in Medicine, Outlaws, Queer Social Work Alliance, rXs, Stonewall Democrats, LGBT Fridays, Out in Public, Outbreak, and Out in Science.

“sex,” approximately one-third of this sample consisted of women who indicated that they have not had partnered “sex.”<sup>12</sup>

*Age.* The majority of the one-on-one and group interview sample consisted of 18 to 23 year olds (85.9%). However, 14.1% did consist of individuals between the ages of 24 and 29. See *Table 1* for more participant demographic information.

*Sample Limitations.* I limited my sample to persons under 29 because I was interested in understanding the role masturbation plays in young women’s development (or lack of development) of an embodied sexual subjectivity, and the subsequent sexual health implications. While women’s sexual development continues throughout their lifetime, for the purposes of this research I was particularly interested in retrospective accounts of adolescence and the transition (or lack of) to sexual pleasure in young adulthood. Rather than examining generational differences between women with regard to masturbation, I was primarily concerned with capturing the contemporary moment. I chose 29 as the cut off age because 30 years-old is often culturally considered as a transition point in terms of maturity and lifestyle. I have limited my sample to persons of at least 18 years of age because the Institutional Review Board (IRB) classifies individuals below 18 as a protected population. Given present-day concerns about the sexualization of youth and the largely taboo nature of a topic like female masturbation, I felt that gaining IRB approval, as well as parental consent, would be

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to account for varying definitions of “sex” and “virginity” because while research suggests that most people consider penile-vaginal intercourse as “sex,” there is significant variability in whether or not individuals describe themselves as having “had sex” or identify as “virgins” if they have engaged in such activities as manual genital stimulation, oral-genital stimulation, or penile-anal intercourse (Sanders and Reinisch 2004).

a very time-consuming, arduous, and potentially financially burdensome, process. Thus, by not including persons below 18 years of age in my sample, I significantly expedited my IRB approval and data collection processes.

My final interview sample consisted of 12 focus group participants and 59 one-on-one interview participants (see *Table 1*). As discussed above, because this was an exploratory project, I solely utilized non-probability sampling techniques (i.e. purposive and snowball sampling) for participant recruitment. As a consequence, while my population was religiously, sexually, and racially/ethnically diverse, it was not statistically random or representative of the larger U.S. national population. Be that as it may, because I was engaging in an exploratory research project, employing “data-grounded theorizing” (Clarke 2007, 246), and focusing on finding new sources of data for an understudied topic, attaining a statistically representative sample of certain populations was *not* a priority. While my sample was large for a primarily qualitative project, it does not permit broad generalizations about specific populations.

**TABLE 1. INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY<sup>13</sup>**

DEMOGRAPHIC	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS ( <i>n</i> =71)
<i>Age</i>		
18-20	46.5%	33
21-23	39.4%	28
24-29	14.1%	10

<sup>13</sup> All demographic information is based on self-identification. With regard to sexual identity, reported sexual attraction and behavior did not necessarily align with self-reported identities.



<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White	60.6%	43
Hispanic/Latina	20.0%	14
Multiracial	8.5%	6
Black/African-American	5.6%	4
Arab-American	2.8%	2
Indian	1.4%	1
Native American	1.4%	1
<i>Religion</i>		
Unaffiliated <sup>14</sup>	36.7%	26
Protestant <sup>15</sup>	28.2%	20
Catholic	11.3%	8
Jewish	8.5%	6
LDS	7.0%	5
Muslim	2.8%	2
Multi-religious	2.8%	2
Armenian Orthodox	1.4%	1
Pagan	1.4%	1
<i>Sexual Identity</i>		
Heterosexual/Straight	76.1%	54
Lesbian/Gay/Female-attracted	7.0%	5
Bisexual	5.6%	4
Queer	4.2%	3

<sup>14</sup> Includes participants who identified as atheist, agnostic, non-religious, non-practicing, and spiritual.

<sup>15</sup> Includes participants who identified as Protestant, Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Evangelical, Non-denominational, and Christian (unspecified).

Asexual	2.8%	2
Pansexual	1.4%	1
Unlabeled	1.4%	1

Because I recruited on college campuses through student organizations all of my participants were in the process of completing or had already completed their undergraduate college education. Therefore, the education and socioeconomic status of my sample was not reflective of the larger U.S. population. While recruiting a community sample may have resulted in a more statistically representative group of participants, I chose to utilize a college sample to facilitate the timely completion of my dissertation. Because I recruited from large public universities in two geographically and culturally diverse locations (both of which have particularly high populations of non-traditional and first generation college students) in states where the median household income is lower than nationally (United States Census Bureau 2010), I believe that my sample is more socioeconomically diverse in comparison with most other college samples.

It is also important to consider the influence of non-response bias on my sample. While I did not mention masturbation in any of my recruitment materials, I did state that the study was related to “sexuality.” Additionally, I only offered participant incentives (food and refreshments) for focus groups, and not for one-on-one interviews, so it is likely that those who volunteered to participate in one-on-one interviews were more interested in and comfortable discussing their sexual feelings and behaviors in comparison with the general population. Nonetheless, as I

will show in the chapters to follow, there was remarkable diversity in the backgrounds, narratives, and experiences of my participants. The fact that my sample included individuals who have and have not masturbated, and have and have not had “sex” (including many who have not engaged in sexual activity beyond kissing), as well as those who expressed discomfort with a number of sexual topics, suggests that my sample is diverse and does not consist solely of a “sexually liberal” population. As a common critique of sexuality research is that volunteers tend to possess more permissive attitudes toward sexuality, be more sexually experienced, and feel less sexual guilt and inhibition in comparison with the general population (Morokoff 1986; Strassberg and Lowe 1995; Wiederman 1999), the fact that this study consists of participants who possess a variety of attitudes toward sexuality and levels of sexual experience is a significant strength.

***Protocols.*** Interviews and focus groups at both universities took place in small conference rooms. All were audio-recorded with subjects’ permission. I received IRB approval to use oral rather than written consent as signed consent forms can compromise participants’ confidentiality. The verbal consent script contained all the information that an informed consent document would, and a written copy of the verbal consent script was provided to participants.

***Focus Groups.*** After obtaining verbal consent, and explaining the “ground” rules for focus group discussion, I gave all participants a *New York Times* article published in April 2011 entitled “Vibrators Carry the Conversation” (see Appendices B and C). They were instructed to underline, take notes, and so forth, and to spend a few minutes writing down their initial reaction to the article. I then posed a series of

pre-determined questions to the group for discussion (see Appendix B) one at a time, sometimes following up with additional questions depending on the flow of the conversation. Finally, participants were instructed to complete a written questionnaire and demographic information sheet (see Appendix D). The written questionnaire consisted of the following multiple-choice psychological scales: Female Sexual Function Index (Rosen et al. 2000), Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck 2006), Female Genital Self-Image Scale (Herbenick and Reece 2010), and Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi and Shields 1984). Participants were also provided with the opportunity to write down any additional information and to reflect on what it was like for them to participate in the focus group in an open-ended format.

*Interviews.* After obtaining verbal consent, one-on-one interview participants were asked a series of questions based on a pre-determined interview schedule (see Appendix E). Because of the sensitivity of the topic of masturbation, I began with more innocuous questions about the participants' life (e.g. demographic information), experiences with sexual education, and so forth. As a result, by the time I asked about masturbation, participants were already much more comfortable speaking with me and opening up about personal issues. In approximately one-half of interviews (49%), the participant brought up the topic of masturbation *before* I did in the process of answering an earlier question. In those cases I was able to naturally segue to the topic of masturbation by saying, "Earlier you referred to masturbation. Let's talk a little more about that." Also, I waited until a later point in the interview, when it related to information provided by the participant, to ask

about sexual identity/orientation. I also purposely did not ask participants directly about number of sexual partners or relationships, or their experience of virginity loss. Instead, I framed most questions so that they would apply to anyone, regardless of sexual orientation or experiences. At the end of the interview I provided participants with the opportunity to add any additional information or ask me any questions, and then asked them to complete the same written questionnaire that was also completed by focus group participants. I believe that my position as a young white woman and a fellow student helped me develop rapport with my interview subjects. I would generally engage in small talk with participants prior to officially beginning (and recording), which gave me an opportunity to establish potential points of commonality, such as having lived in the same city as a respondent.

As these were semi-structured interviews, the questions I asked evolved over the course of my data collection process. For example, at the beginning, I asked each participant to tell me about a “particularly pleasurable” and a “particularly *not* pleasurable” sexual experience. In addition, I asked each to describe a “particularly pleasurable” masturbation experience. As I proceeded with the data collection, however, I realized that some individuals had had quite unpleasant masturbation experiences, and so I began asking about those experiences as well.

**Journals.** Because masturbation is such a sensitive topic, I wanted to see if better quality data could be collected in private, at home over time, in comparison with a questionnaire or one-time in-person interview or focus group. Consequently, as a required assignment (15% of final grade) for part of an undergraduate Women

and Sexuality course which I taught during the Spring 2012 semester at ASU, I asked students to keep a sex reflection journal over the course of the semester. Students were asked to record and reflect on the details of all of their sexual experiences and feelings, alone or with a partner. The assignment required that students write one journal entry per week for the duration of the semester (13 total entries). Different guiding questions were provided for weeks in which the student did or did not have any sexual experiences to report. For weeks in which students did not have any sexual experiences to report they were asked to reflect on whether or not they wanted to engage in any sexual experiences that week, if they specifically sought out or avoided sexual activity, and how they felt about this. For weeks in which students did have sexual experiences to report, they were encouraged to provide as much detail as possible in their entries, including when and where, the sequence of events, who else was involved (if anyone), and other important factors (e.g. relationship context, sex toy<sup>16</sup> use). In addition, students were instructed to use general descriptive terms (e.g. girlfriend, husband) rather than specific names. See Appendix F for full journal assignment.

Because I did not want to influence how or whether or not students chose to write about masturbation experiences, I made sure that students were unaware that my current research was on masturbation, telling them only that my work was on “sexuality, health, and the body.” I only revealed the nature of my work to them after

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<sup>16</sup> I did not define what counts as a “sex toy” for participants. Rather than impose a definition for this term, throughout this manuscript I employ the language participants’ used to describe any “accessories” beyond their hands that they incorporated to stimulate themselves during masturbation, whether it be a product one might purchase specifically for pleasure-related purposes (e.g. vibrator, dildo) or a more general household item or fixture (e.g. pillow, couch, water jet).

they submitted the final journals and consent forms, primarily so those students who wrote mostly about solitary sexual experiences would feel better about not having had many partnered sexual experiences to report.

Although students were required to write the journals, they were given the opportunity to opt in or out of the research project at the end of the semester when they submitted the journal. All students received informed consent forms asking for their consent to participate. These forms stated that: 1) they were not required to participate in the study, 2) all names and identifying characteristics would be deleted or changed in any publications that might result from the research, and 3) all names and identifying information would be removed before I graded their journals. A separate demographic form asked for their age, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, college major, and parents' education (see Appendix G). Consent forms were turned in along with the journals, so the students knew what they had written and could make an informed decision about whether they wanted to be included in the research project.

The journals were collected and names removed by a fellow graduate student, so I, as the instructor of record for the course, would never know the identity of the author of each journal or know which students had participated. The journals were collected by the graduate student at three pre-determined intervals throughout the semester, to ensure that students stayed on track, and did not wait until the end of the semester to complete all the entries. The graduate student then assigned a code to each participant's journal and removed or blacked out all unique identifying information before submitting it to me for grading. I assigned grades

based on completion of the assignment, not participation in the research. Once I completed grading the anonymous journals, the graduate student referred to a master list of names and ID codes that were kept in a secure on-campus office (not accessible to me), and assigned the proper grade for each student. After the graduate student entered the final grades, the journals completed by students who opted against participating in the research were immediately destroyed. Out of a class of 59 students, 38 women and 10 men completed a sex reflection journal and provided written consent for their journal's inclusion in my research. As this dissertation specifically focuses on discourses, ideologies, and experiences related to women and masturbation, the men's journals are not included in this analysis.<sup>17</sup>

Because "solo masturbation" and "partnered masturbation" were provided as only two examples of possible experiences one might discuss in the journal among a number of others (i.e. kissing, fondling, touching genitals, oral sex, penile-vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse, group sex, phone sex, cybersex, sexting, watching pornography, fantasizing), it was not clear whether these journals would produce any data on masturbation. My concerns were unwarranted, however, as the overwhelming majority of women (28 women in total, or 74%) wrote about and reflected on their personal experiences with masturbation in at least one entry. The number of entries including discussion of personal masturbation experience ranged from one to ten, with the average journal mentioning masturbation experience in

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<sup>17</sup> An alternative assignment was provided for those students who did not choose to complete the sex reflection journal assignment. For this assignment, rather than recording their own sexual experiences, students were asked to write about sexual content and gendered messages that they observed around them each week (e.g. media images, conversations about sex, experiences in a sex-related or sexualized setting).



almost four weekly entries (3.75). While ten of the women did not record personal experiences with masturbation, seven wrote about their general thoughts, attitudes, and conflicts regarding female masturbation (including explaining why they do *not* masturbate) in at least one entry. Only three women did not discuss female masturbation in any capacity in their journals.

Although the data comes from a small convenience sample, the sample was diverse. Approximately one-half (52.6%) of the participants were between 21 and 23 years old. Approximately one-third (30%) were between 18 and 20 years old and 18.4% were between 24 and 32 years old. Because this course met a general education science and society requirement, students represented a variety of majors, including humanities, social sciences, physical sciences, engineering, business, and visual and performing arts. Only two students indicated that they were currently women's studies majors. Only about one-half (52.6%) of the sample identified as white, with 23.7% identifying as Hispanic, and 10.5% as Native American. The remainder identified as Asian (5.3%), black or African-American (2.6%), Arab-American (2.6%), or "other" (2.6%). In addition, more than one-quarter (26.3%) of the sample did not identify as heterosexual or straight, including: lesbian or gay (2.6%), bisexual (18.4%) and those who opted not to identify their sexual identity (5.3%). Finally, while almost one-half (44.7%) of the women indicated that they currently do not have a religious identification (regardless of their upbringing), the same percentage (44.7%) identified with a Christian-based faith. Over one-quarter (26.3%) identified with an unspecified Christian denomination, 10.5% as Catholic, 2.6% as Methodist, 2.6% as Non-Denominational,

and 2.6% as LDS. The remaining students identified as Buddhist (5.3%) or opted not to respond (5.3%). See *Table 2* for more participant demographic information.

*TABLE 2. JOURNAL DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY*<sup>18</sup>

DEMOGRAPHIC	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS ( <i>n</i> =38)
<i>Age</i>		
18-20	30.0%	11
21-23	52.6%	20
24-32	18.4%	7
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White	52.6%	20
Hispanic/Latina	23.7%	9
Native American	10.5%	4
Asian	5.3%	2
Arab-American	2.6%	1
Black/African-American	2.6%	1
Other	2.6%	1
<i>Religion</i>		
Unaffiliated <sup>19</sup>	44.7%	17
Protestant <sup>20</sup>	31.6%	12
Catholic	10.5%	4

<sup>18</sup> All demographic information is based on self-identification. With regard to sexual identity, reported sexual attraction and behavior did not necessarily align with self-reported identities.

<sup>19</sup> Includes participants who identified as atheist, agnostic, non-religious, non-practicing, and spiritual.

<sup>20</sup> Includes participants who identified as Methodist, Non-denominational, and Christian (unspecified).

Buddhist	5.3%	2
LDS	2.6%	1
No Response	5.3%	2
<i>Sexual Identity</i>		
Heterosexual/Straight	73.7%	28
Bisexual	18.4%	7
Lesbian/Gay/Female-attracted	2.6%	1
No Response	5.3%	2

***Sample Limitations.*** Despite the diverse nature of the journal sample, it is important to acknowledge that sample participants were part of a non-random, highly self-selected group. First, participants had to be college undergraduates at ASU, which suggests a certain level of socioeconomic and educational privilege, or at least expectations of upward mobility. Second, they had to be interested and willing to enroll and participate in an advanced level course entitled “Women and Sexuality” offered by ASU’s Women and Gender Studies Department. Third, they had to specifically opt in to the sex reflection journal, instead of the alternative assignment. This suggests that individuals in the final journal sample are ones who were already interested in and relatively open to discussing sexuality-related topics, whether it be personally reflecting upon them or conversing about them with others. As mentioned above, because this was an exploratory study, finding novel ways to gather rich data on a sensitive and controversial topic like female

masturbation was more of a priority than attaining a statistically representative sample.

**Final Sample Demographics.** The final sample including all sources of data collection consisted of 109 participants between the ages of 18 and 32. While the majority fell between the ages of 18 and 23 (84.4%), 15.6% were 24 to 32 years old. This is reflective of the fact that ASU serves a particularly high non-traditional student population and that I did not limit participation to solely undergraduate students. From a racial perspective, my final sample was quite nationally representative. More than one-half (57.8%) of the sample identified as white, which is a bit lower than the national average (63.7%). Over one-fifth (21.1%) identified as Hispanic or Latina, 5.5% as multi-racial, 4.6% as black or African-American, 4.6% as Native American, 2.6% as Arab-American, 1.8% as Asian, 0.9% as Indian, and 0.9% as “other.” Consistent with the relatively higher populations in Arizona, this sample contained a higher percentage of Hispanics/Latinas and Native Americans in comparison with the national average (16.4% and 0.7% respectively), and less blacks/African-Americans and Asians (12.2% and 4.7% respectively) (United States Census Bureau 2010).

The final sample was religiously diverse. Consistent with national averages, more participants identified as belonging to a Christian-based U.S. religion than any other (45.9%). While 12.8% did not specify their Christian denomination, 11.0% identified as Catholic, 9.2% as Non-Denominational, 5.5% as LDS, 1.8% as Baptist, 1.8% as Methodist, 0.9% as Episcopalian, 0.9% as Lutheran, 0.9% as Evangelical, and 0.9% as Protestant. Significantly higher than the national average (15.0%),

however, 39.4% of the sample considered themselves to be currently religiously unaffiliated (e.g. atheist, agnostic, non-religious, non-practicing, spiritual). This likely reflects that participants were recruited on large public university campuses for a sexuality study. Finally, a higher proportion than national averages in the United States, 5.5% of the sample identified as Jewish, 1.8% as Buddhist, 1.8% as Muslim, 0.9% as Pagan, and 0.9% as Armenian Orthodox. A small percentage (1.8%) currently identified with more than one religion and 1.8% opted to not provide a response. While the percentage of participants currently identifying as Catholic is significantly lower than the national average (25.1%), this is likely explained by the high proportion of non-affiliated participants in the sample who were raised as Catholic, but no longer identify as such. The higher percentage of LDS participants compared with the national average (1.4%) is reflective of the higher LDS representation in Arizona (4%) (Kosmin and Keysar 2009).

Lastly, my attempt to over-sample LGBTQ individuals was successful, as approximately one-in-four (24.8%) participants did not identify as heterosexual or straight (in contrast to a national average of 6.4% of LGBTQ individuals between the ages of 18 and 29) (Gates 2012). More than one-tenth (11.0%) identified as bisexual; 5.5% as lesbian, gay, or female-attracted; 2.6% as queer; 1.8% as asexual; 0.9% as pansexual; and 0.9% as unlabeled. A small percentage (1.8%) opted not to respond. See *Table 3* for more participant demographic information.

TABLE 3. INTERVIEW, FOCUS GROUP, AND JOURNAL DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY<sup>21</sup>

DEMOGRAPHIC	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS ( <i>n</i> =109)
<i>Age</i>		
18-20	40.4%	44
21-23	44.0%	48
24-32	15.6%	17
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White	57.8%	63
Hispanic/Latina	21.1%	23
Multiracial	5.5%	6
Black/African-American	4.6%	5
Native American	4.6%	5
Arab-American	2.6%	3
Asian	1.8%	2
Indian	0.9%	1
Other	0.9%	1
<i>Religion</i>		
Unaffiliated <sup>22</sup>	39.4%	43
Protestant <sup>23</sup>	29.4%	32
Catholic	11.0%	12

<sup>21</sup> All demographic information is based on self-identification. With regard to sexual identity, reported sexual attraction and behavior did not necessarily align with self-reported identities.

<sup>22</sup> Includes participants who identified as atheist, agnostic, non-religious, non-practicing, and spiritual.

<sup>23</sup> Includes participants who identified as Protestant, Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Evangelical, Non-denominational, and Christian (unspecified).

LDS	5.5%	6
Jewish	5.5%	6
Buddhist	1.8%	2
Muslim	1.8%	2
Multi-religious	1.8%	2
Pagan	0.9%	1
Armenian Orthodox	0.9%	1
No Response	1.8%	2
<i>Sexual Identity</i>		
Heterosexual/Straight	75.2%	82
Bisexual	11.0%	12
Lesbian/Gay/Female-attracted	5.5%	6
Queer	2.6%	3
Asexual	1.8%	2
Pansexual	0.9%	1
Unlabeled	0.9%	1
No Response	1.8%	2

### **Data Analysis**

Using this combination of ethnographic methods enabled me to explore sexual and gendered attitudes and behaviors and the discourses and ideologies underlying these attitudes and behaviors in a way that quantitative methods could not. With the understanding that bridging the gap between the social sciences and humanities, as well as other disciplines, may improve the quality, breadth, and generalizability of my research, after transcribing the interviews and focus group

dialogues, and reviewing the sexual experience journals, I utilized Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory approach and NVivo's data analysis software to explore the discourses, ideologies, and experiences related to women and masturbation.

### **Grounded Theory**

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory approach is rooted in the idea that research design, concepts, and working theories should develop inductively (within the research process); this approach is most critical when approaching a topic that has received relatively little attention "on its own terms," meaning that it has been studied through pre-existing paradigms determined by researchers rather than emergent data provided by participants. Given the lack of significant data and theorizing regarding young women and masturbation, utilizing such an approach facilitated a "fluid, flexible, and dynamic research process" that not only allowed, but encouraged me "to think outside the box" (Kitch 2007, 124). In contrast with the objectivist assumption that science can and should be based on logic and that scientists should be "value-free" (Harding 2007, 56), grounded theory provided me with me space for the inclusion of values, interests, and assumptions as a productive part of the knowledge construction process, including my own role in the normalization or pathologization of participants' sexuality (see further discussion in Appendix A "Ethical Reflections"). Grounded theory also helped to facilitate the consideration of multiplicity and difference, allowing me to avoid constructing dualisms that may "limit and constrain thinking in ways that are oppositional and hierarchical" (Gannon and Davies 2007, 73). For example, as mentioned above,



previous research on young women and sexuality has often attempted to organize women and girls into categories based on their sexual identity, race, or behavior. Employing a grounded theory approach, however, made it easier for me to conceptualize female sexuality in terms of a larger diversity of experience and meaning. In this way, grounded theory allowed me to incorporate aspects of intersectionality theory and consider how certain identities might converge or be particularly salient with regard to gendered ideologies, discourses, and experiences of female masturbation, without exploiting sexual “difference” and perpetuating social hierarchies and inequalities. Finally, rather than glossing over potential power differentials between me and the participants, which is often the case in research, because the theory and analysis are grounded in the process itself, power issues are much more likely to be illuminated than with more traditional methodological strategies. While maintaining some of the systemic, positivist elements of traditional social science research, grounded theory allowed me to integrate some more critical, deconstructive aspects, crucial for conducting a gendered analysis of discourses, ideologies, and experiences around female masturbation (see Appendix A for more detail on some of the challenges I encountered with this undertaking).

**Grounded Theory as Feminist.** Grounded theory was a particularly appealing method for this research because, as Adele Clarke (2007) notes, it is “always already implicitly feminist” (347). First, because grounded theory is rooted in a philosophy which emphasizes actual experience and practices, it was ideal for a project in which I sought to give voice to women’s masturbation experiences and

the ideologies that appear to govern their interpretations of those experiences. “Materialist social constructionism,” which is also embedded within grounded theory, further facilitated the acknowledgment of the material, including embodiment, in the interpretation and analyses of my data (348). As Clarke says, the “social is relentlessly material *and* constructed – not ‘merely’ epiphenomenal” (348). Considering the body as simultaneously material and socially constructed was crucial for developing an understanding of the meanings and mechanisms of masturbation on a bodily, emotional, and social level. What is more, grounded theory’s emphasis on multiplicity allowed me the freedom to consider a diversity of experiences and identities without necessarily creating or reinscribing dichotomous categories. Finally, grounded theory also left me room to consider that coding and interpretation are subjective, and so there may be multiple simultaneous readings of data.

In addition to the above points, there are several other ways in which grounded theory facilitated my feminist research. First, because the method and analysis are derived from the data itself, grounded theory was ideal for performing research on topics on which there has been little or no previous research. This is particularly significant for a field like women and gender studies which prides itself on achieving new levels of interdisciplinarity and being mindful of who has previously been left out of research. Mary Hawkesworth (2007) argues that “systematic inquiry to ‘unbury’ the data of women’s lives is crucial, precisely because women have so often been omitted from scientific studies” (483). In this case, the utilization of grounded theory allowed for the examination of a previously

taboo and little researched topic like young women and masturbation, as there was a limited pool of knowledge to draw upon with regard to formulating theories or conceptual relationships. Ultimately, grounded theory helped me to systematically, yet dynamically, theorize a relationship between concepts that may have previously never been linked.

The fluidity and subjectivity inherent in grounded theory facilitated my measuring of the “intangible” and “immeasurable” in ways that would have been difficult with other methods. Grounded theory specifically helped me to recognize emotions and meaning-making processes as central aspects of knowledge building. For example, while much previous research on young women and sexuality has focused on the more material aspects, such as pregnancy, illness, or sexual assault, grounded theory allowed me to examine girls’ desire and pleasure, and consider the personal and larger societal meanings of female masturbation.

In addition, grounded theory helped me to embrace “the messy” (Smart 2009, 296). Smart emphasizes the importance of presenting and examining contradictions and dilemmas produced in research, proposing that “methods must be developed which can both grasp the mess and then find ways to represent messiness without forcing a coherence and kind of logic on to lived experience” (296). Hawkesworth (2007) similarly asserts that feminist researchers should not only “emphasize the complexity and diversity of empirical strategies of knowledge production,” but should also “note that conflict, contestation, argument, and disagreement are both central to and productive for the practices of scientific inquiry” (483). Grounded theory discourages researchers from shying away from

this “messiness,” urging them to engage with the various contradictions which might emerge within their analysis. For example, use of this method helped me to illuminate some of the contradictions in how young women negotiate their desires and experiences of individual and partnered pleasure. Rather than just assuming that engaging in or talking about female masturbation is universally pleasurable and empowering, I used grounded theory to push further to try to understand how young women might use dominant discourses to make meaning of their own sexuality in light of societal gender norms and expectations. Embracing these kinds of complexities is a key characteristic of feminist research, as elucidating and problematizing individual and societal contradictions or dilemmas like these which have previously gone unexamined is a critical goal of women and gender studies as a discipline.

**Grounded Theory and Transdisciplinarity.** Finally, grounded theory helped me to go beyond a simple additive research model, facilitating transformative, transdisciplinary scholarship. Distinct from feminist post-structuralist approaches, as a more positivist methodological approach, grounded theory permitted me the space to trouble the concept of ‘objectivism’ and integrate theoretical frameworks and methods from a variety of fields in novel ways, yet at the same time ground my research in empirical data. For example, I was able to draw on pertinent theoretical concepts from women and gender studies, psychology, sociology, history, media/cultural studies, education, and public health. In addition, I was able to analyze various types of data sources, including ethnographic individual and group interviews, and journals, and contextualize them

within larger cultural discourses. In this way, grounded theory helped me to merge the social sciences and the humanities to formulate a more 'critical social science' or more systematic, empirical humanities research. Bridging the methodological gap that often exists between the social sciences and humanities in this way is important because it increases possibilities for scholars from a variety of disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) backgrounds to engage with, replicate, and build on this research, hence contributing to the expansion of the scope of women and gender studies' influence on and interaction with other academic fields.

### **Coding**

In accordance with grounded theory, I employed an open coding technique to identify salient themes related to female masturbation. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants and any other identifying information was removed or replaced before coding began. I sought to interpret the interviews and journals "for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and then organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme" (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 11). The theoretical concepts outlined in the literature review and gleaned from my initial notes on the group and one-on-one interview transcripts and journals were used as a starting point for analysis. A line-by-line analysis was conducted, and the transcripts were read multiple times in order to continue to reflect on and reformulate working theories about the relationships that materialized within the dataset. As the transcripts were examined further, thematic groups emerged.

Three types of categorization "nodes" were created in Nvivo: 1) person, 2) question, and 3) theoretical. Person nodes denoted specific information about the

participant, such as demographic information like age, religion, sexual orientation, and so forth. Question nodes referred to responses to a specific question from the interview schedule (e.g. “Tell me about a particularly pleasurable masturbation experience”). Finally, the majority of nodes were theoretical, as they were used to identify and analyze significant theoretical concepts and implications (e.g. pleasure as Other-oriented, masturbation as “performance”). I also created three types of memos to chronicle the coding process and keep track of developing theories, including various themes and sub-themes, as they evolved: 1) code descriptions, 2) personal descriptions, and 3) theoretical. Code descriptions were brief explanations of the meaning of a code. For example, that “clitoral only” refers to participants’ expression of or describing of an experience involving solely clitoral stimulation during masturbation, regardless of method. Code descriptions were written for every potential theme and sub-theme. Personal description memos were written for each interview or journal participant, summarizing any particularly interesting or notable information or factors that might be potentially relevant to the analysis (such as frequent mention of church or God, or hints at how early masturbation might connect to a later sense of sexual entitlement). Finally, I developed theoretical memos: analytical notes relating to a specific code or set of codes. For example, one memo indicated that many women did not find pornography to be arousing during masturbation unless they could relate to the sexual activities represented in a bodily manner (e.g. the sexual position or activity was something that they knew was pleasurable from their own real life experience). In another, I noted how many of the participants accommodated their masturbation experiences within a

heteronormative context (e.g. fantasizing about partner). While some codes were etic, derived from established theories and theoretical perspectives, the majority were emic, constructed inductively from the participants' own experiences and language.

### **Limitations of Analysis**

Given the exploratory, rather than experimental, nature of this study, I cannot conclusively speak to causal relationships between various factors. I did identify connections between particular aspects of participants' narratives, and this helped to stimulate my thinking about potential relationships between these factors that would benefit from further qualitative or quantitative investigation. I did examine certain incidents or discourses and attempt to demonstrate how they may contribute to the normalization or pathologization of (self-) pleasure for young women. The fact that certain memories were particularly salient to participants with regard to this topic and that they shared them in their narratives certainly speaks to their importance. In the end, the codebook developed on this emergent data and the analysis it inspired will be a useful tool from which to generate new hypotheses and research questions.

### **Conclusion**

Utilizing feminist ethnographic methods to ground my research in the lived experiences of actual women, and then examining their personal experiences in the context of larger societal discourses, I am able to give voice to women and perspectives that have previously been silenced. Through my research methods, I sought to empower participants by arming them with some of the tools they need to

develop an embodied sexual awareness and subjectivity, and ultimately challenge some of the gendered sexuality discourses of which they often spoke. By presenting my participants with the opportunity to engage with topics that they are rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to discuss or learn about, I allowed them to not only be subjects, but active participants in, and beneficiaries of, the research process. Thus, the findings of this research will not only yield significant theoretical and practical implications, but hopefully result in material changes in the lives of girls and young women.



## CHAPTER 4

### LEARNING THE DOMINANT CULTURAL DISCOURSES AND SILENCES AROUND FEMALE (SELF-) PLEASURE

In this chapter I explore how both *existing* and *missing* messages about female sexuality, desire, and pleasure can affect how girls understand female masturbation. First, I will describe participants' retrospective narratives about their own girlhoods, illustrating what they reported that they had learned about self-pleasure through school, parents, religious communities, peers, and media (all primary sources of early socialization). I then explore the positive, prohibitive, and missing sexuality messages propagated through these sources and discuss how they appear to have influenced how these girls (and now young women) have come to understand female masturbation.

In examining these narratives as a whole, I establish that the primary cultural discourse around female masturbation in the United States is *silence*. The widespread cultural silence around female masturbation and pleasure constructs female self-pleasure as taboo, and establishes a masturbation double standard. When this silence is disrupted, female masturbation is almost exclusively portrayed in a negative light: as a sin or a (secular) stigma. Finally, in the absence of many (positive or prohibitive) representations or discussions of female masturbation during girlhood specifically, I consider how these young women often drew upon a more general discourse of heteronormativity to make meaning of their own and others female masturbation feelings and experiences.

The findings presented in this chapter are primarily based on responses provided in one-on-one interviews to a series of specific questions and prompts in which I inquired as to what, if anything, a participant remembered learning about sexuality (in general), sexual pleasure, masturbation, and their body in school, through their religious community, and from parents, friends, and popular media. With that said, pertinent information provided by participants during other parts of a one-on-one interview, as well as in a group interview or journal, was also included. I then categorized all resulting relevant data into positive, prohibitive, or missing (absent or silent) messages during the analysis phase of this research.

### **School**

As discussed in Chapter 1, abstinence-only-until-marriage ideologies prevail in the majority of school sexual education programs today. Rooted in traditional Christian values of morality and chastity, these curricula often employ scare tactics and solely emphasize potential sexual dangers in order to discourage any kind of adolescent sexual behavior. Even teachers of more comprehensive programs still frequently communicate “hidden lessons,” often by the information or representations they do *not* provide, which deny and silence girls’ sexual desire, pleasure, and agency.

### **Silence**

Given that most sexual education programs tend to focus on sex primarily in the context of reproductive functioning and potential sexual dangers (Fields 2008), it is no surprise that the overwhelming majority of participants did not recall learning anything about female pleasure, let alone masturbation, in school. On the

rare occasion that the term “masturbation” arose in class, it was usually not part of the curriculum, but rather student-initiated as part of an unscripted activity. The young women I interviewed indicated that teachers tended to manage these discussions poorly. For example, when I spoke with Jess (19, white, heterosexual, Episcopalian), she recalled it being very “awkward” when another female student asked the guys “how often they masturbate” as part of a “fish bowl” activity in her sexual education class. That being the case, she said that the discussion was not “taken one-hundred percent seriously.” Although, at the same time, she appreciated that it got “stuff out there a bit.” Melissa (19, white, heterosexual, non-practicing Christian) similarly recalls other students in her sexual education class asking “funny questions” about masturbation “more to get a reaction out of people” during a “question box” activity. She says, “Then the teachers had to ... stick to specific dialogues, so it was hard for them to really explain what it was because they were having to use the proper vocabulary.” While these activities provided an opportunity for girls to learn and talk about masturbation, because other students frequently did not take these discussions seriously, the sexual education classroom was not necessarily perceived as a safe space. Furthermore, because masturbation is generally only brought up informally in such activities and is not a scripted part of most sexual education curricula, these discussions are likely biased by the students’ (and teacher’s) pre-conceived notions about the topic. Accordingly, as in Jess’s experience, masturbation was discussed solely in terms of male behavior.

## **Prohibitive Messages**

While most girls did not remember learning anything positive about masturbation in school, most did not recall receiving any explicitly negative messages about masturbation in school either. One exception was when a teacher caught a student touching himself in school. Ashley (21, white, heterosexual, LDS) recalls seeing a boy “playing with himself” in her seventh grade science class. Once the teacher noticed, he yelled, “Get out of this classroom!” He sent the boy to the principal’s office and said, “You can’t do that in here.” Ashley remembers thinking, “Oh my gosh, that’s what masturbation is ... So scary.” This experience not only taught Ashley that masturbation is “scary,” but that it is something for which boys should be (and are) punished.

## **Positive Messages**

When asked specifically about the messages they received about female masturbation in school, only two of the fifty-nine young women who participated in a one-on-one interview indicated that they were explicitly taught that masturbation is normal, healthy, and pleasurable for men *and* women through school. Nikki (19, African-American, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) had a health teacher in high school who spoke openly about her own experiences with female masturbation during an afterschool program. Her teacher said, “Masturbation is normal. I do it all the time and I feel good about myself. If I’m stressed out, I’ll just go home and go in my room and masturbate until I feel better.” Nikki’s teacher further reiterated the normalcy of female masturbation by saying, “You have the right to make up your own mind. Don’t let anyone tell you that it’s the wrong thing to do

until you try it and then you figure out for yourself if you like it or not.” Hence, Nikki learned that masturbation was “okay.” Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish) also learned that masturbation is “completely normal/natural” through sexual education in high school. She reflects, “It must’ve taken time for me to actually believe it, but eventually I got there, and I don’t know if accepting masturbation would’ve been possible otherwise.” Even though most girls did not receive positive messages about female sexuality and pleasure in school, Nikki and Yana’s narratives nevertheless speak to the important role teachers can play in normalizing female (self-) pleasure for girls.

### **Parents**

Parents have long possessed significant influence over what their children learn about sex, especially during the early years. Children learn how to talk about and understand various aspects of sexuality through observations of their parents’ conversations and actions. “Everything that parents and families (including siblings) do with regard to sex is instructional, even if some of the messages are quite subtle” (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002, 131). In the end, as discussed in Chapter 1, parents often reinforce the same heteronormative and prohibitive sexual messages that girls learn in school, such as the dangers of pre-marital sex and the assumption that girls are (and should be) asexual.

Therefore, many of the early messages participants received and subsequently internalized about female sexuality came from their parents. For most girls, these early messages were overwhelmingly prohibitive, either explicitly negative or implicitly negative by their absence. As a consequence, most girls

internalized primarily negative ideologies about female (self-) pleasure from their parents. However, a small minority received explicitly positive messages about female sexuality, pleasure, and even masturbation, which helped them begin to develop an understanding of female (self-) pleasure as healthy and normal.

### **Prohibitive Messages**

Most girls received primarily prohibitive messages about female sexuality and pleasure from their parents as they were growing up. In observant religious families, the same conservative sexuality messages propagated within their religious communities (which will be discussed further in the next section) were also reinforced at home. Parents from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds also frequently discouraged their daughters from learning about or exploring their sexuality in general. Finally, sometimes a family member (usually a parent or grandparent) would directly chastise a girl for genital self-touching.

**Reinforcing Religious Discourses.** Many of the prohibitive sexuality discourses and silences to which girls were exposed within their religious communities were also reinforced at home. Because religious mothers and fathers frequently feel more uncomfortable about the idea of discussing masturbation with their daughters over any other sexual topic, they are less likely to speak about masturbation (even in a prohibitive sense) in comparison with less religious families (Farrington, Holgate, McIntyre, and Bulsara 2013; Miller et al. 2013). Instead, parents in religious households frequently extolled the virtues of remaining abstinent until marriage (to a man) to their daughters. As Katelyn (24, white, heterosexual, LDS) says, “From my parents I learned what we believe is the correct

way to go about sexual relationships in the church in God's eyes, that we should wait until we're married to have sex and we should keep ourselves pure." As at church, even when girls learned that sex is potentially pleasurable, like Ashley (21, white, heterosexual, LDS), they learned from parents that it is only "beautiful and sacred ... within marriage." Parents also reinforced traditional religious ideas about female morality relating to abstaining from pre-marital sexual relations. Connie (26, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for example, received a Claddaugh ring from her parents after she was confirmed in the Catholic Church. Her father gave her the ring as a "symbol," and told her it was because "you're becoming a woman and keeping yourself pure." Thus, even when parents do not explicitly discuss masturbation with their daughters, through explicit messages that demonize pre-marital sexuality and valorize female purity, girls in religious families still often develop an understanding of masturbation as amoral and sinful for girls.

The explicitly prohibitive masturbation discourses circulated at church were also sometimes echoed at home – for example, the notion that masturbation and pornography addiction are solely male struggles. Ashley, for instance, refers to her brothers' masturbation and pornography struggles as a "family trial" because they do not "condone" masturbation or pornography. Not only did her parents speak to her about her brothers' struggles, but her brothers also spoke directly to her about their experiences and conflicts with "the big 'M'." Thus, Ashley's primary source of exposure to and knowledge about masturbation derives from male experience. She says, "I think the only reason I knew about [masturbation] at all ... is because my two brothers were involved with that. If that hadn't been, I don't think I would've

known anything about it.” By initially learning about masturbation in the context of her brothers’ sexual “struggles” in this way, Ashley developed an understanding of masturbation as an exclusively male behavior.

**Discouraging Sexual Desire and Exploration.** Many girls received explicit messages from their parents that discouraged the development of any kind of sexual knowledge (whether intellectual or experiential) and subsequently led them to develop an understanding of sex and pleasure in general as bad and wrong. Constructing their daughters as asexual in this way was one mechanism parents employed to manage their anxieties about parenting and sexuality (Elliott 2012, 6). Emily (20, white, heterosexual, culturally Lutheran), for instance, recalls how her father always forced her to close her eyes during romantic scenes in movies. And so she thought, “I should not look at this. I should not want anything to do with this because it’s bad.” Another example, Keira (19, white, heterosexual, Christian) did not receive “the sex talk” from her parents until they discovered condoms in her bedroom. She says, “Then I got yelled at. So there was no positive, like ‘You need to be safe. Here it is for you.’ It was like ‘Die child die.’” Thus, both Emily and Keira learned from their parents that they should *not* be sexual in any way.

Many participants shared similar stories about their parents consistently denying the possibility that they might be a sexual person or desire to gain sexual knowledge or experience. Because including the concept of pleasure in the “sex talk” potentially requires both parents and daughters to view and accept each other as “sexual beings,” most parents shy away from such conversations (Elliott 2012, 62). Instead, they focus on instilling sexual fear and shame in their daughters with the



hope that they can keep them safe from potential sexual dangers. In this way, pleasure is often an “evaded lesson” by parents (Elliott 2012, 69), visible only by its absence. As Brie (27, white, bisexual, atheist) writes, “Ever since I discovered my sexual desire the adults in my life tried to get rid of it.” Furthermore, as in Keira’s case, parents frequently tried to discourage sexual curiosity or even chastise girls for behaviors in which they have not engaged, without providing factual information about sex, such as *how* to abstain from it or engage in it safely. Cole (20, Asian/Hispanic, female-attracted, Buddhist/Christian)<sup>24</sup>, for example, shares how it felt to be preemptively blamed for their sexuality without being taught or knowing anything about sex:

I think my family thinks I don't know what sex is or anything. But contradictorily, it feels like they're constantly ... accusing me of having it in a really indirect way. Just being like “you better not come home pregnant” or “watch, you're going to come home pregnant” or whatever ... But they never said “this is what goes on” or “this is what you should do in these situations” or anything.

It is in this way that many parents deny the possibility that their daughters’ might possess sexual interest or agency, yet consider them responsible for any potential negative sexual consequences at the same time.

As a result of such messages from parents, which frame adolescent female sexuality and pleasure as solely morally and physically “bad,” many girls learn that if they act as anything less than virginal or asexual that they may be labeled as a “slut” or “whore.” Girls from diverse backgrounds shared Skyler’s (19, white, heterosexual,

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<sup>24</sup> Because Cole identifies as “gender-neutral,” I use the term “female-bodied individual” instead of “woman,” as well as “they/their” (rather than “she/her”) pronouns, when relaying Cole’s feelings and experiences.

spiritual) perception that “the more girls are open about their sexuality, the more likely they are to be placed in the ‘slut’ category.” Maria (21, Peruvian, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for instance, shares how anything remotely sexual was “looked down upon” in her family because of their cultural values, “When I bought my first pack of tampons, my mom asked me if I was a slut. Because where we’re from in South America, only sluts wore tampons and only sluts shaved, etcetera.” Like so, Maria’s parents warned her of the “dangers” of girls’ simply possessing sexual knowledge, let alone engaging in sexual behavior.

This virgin/whore (good girl/bad girl) double standard embedded in the messages many parents’ communicated about female sexuality led many girls to believe that engaging in or talking about self-pleasure is “slutty.” They are vulnerable to a false dichotomy which dictates that girls are either completely sexually knowledgeable and experienced (sluts) or completely sexually naïve and inexperienced (prudes) (Fields 2008). Because they assume that even just talking about pleasure could give others the impression that they are promiscuous, they consciously avoid engaging in conversations or behaviors which suggest they are sexually knowledgeable or experienced as to not be stigmatized in this way.

According to Maria, she would “get an evil eye from everyone” if she even considered broaching the topic of vibrators. Like Maria, because she feared being “instantly categorized as easy,” Alma (21, Native American, heterosexual, Catholic) also did not feel comfortable to ever talk about masturbation with others. She says, “I think most people view if she’s sexually active, like doing it by herself masturbating, than she also must be sexually active with men.” Bianca (22, Hispanic,

bisexual, non-practicing Catholic) even says, “Maybe if I wasn’t worried about coming off as a ‘slut’ or [being] perceived as promiscuous, then I would feel more comfortable about expressing my sexuality, to myself and to others.” As a result of messages that valorize female sexual purity, girls often feared that masturbating might make them less appealing to (male) sexual partners. Skyler (19, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for instance, believes that men often “get upset” about women engaging in a sexual activity like masturbation because it “affect[s] the whole goodness and purity of the women” that they desire. In this way, many girls internalized the fear that masturbation might stain their public reputation and hinder their ability to attract a (male) partner.

**Chastising for Genital Self-Touching.** As discussed in Chapter 1, girls are often taught by their parents at an early age that their genitals are “private” and that masturbation is “bad” (Lamb 2001, 16). In addition to receiving explicitly negative messages from parents about female sexuality and pleasure in general, some girls also were directly chastised and even physically punished for engaging in genital self-touching as a child.

Some girls possessed strong early memories of a parent or grandparent scolding them for touching their genitals, regardless of their intentions. To this day, Celia (18, Hispanic, heterosexual, no religion), for instance, remembers how her mother berated her once as a child for placing her hand on her genital region after getting out of the shower. Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish), on the other hand, recalls being chastised regularly by her mother: “I used to sleep when I was younger ... curled up in the fetal position with my hand between my legs. And

my mom would be like, 'Don't do that. That's bad'." Leah (19, white, heterosexual, conservative Jewish) similarly remembers how her Russian grandmother would punish her for sleeping with her hand near her genitals. She says, "my grandma used to slap away my hand sometimes when I slept on my stomach and my hand was under the covers and touching/resting near my vagina." In this way, before they even developed an understanding of their actions as "sexual" or potentially pleasurable, girls like Celia, Yana, and Leah learned that their genital region was off-limits.

Carmen and Shalene, on the other hand, recall purposely engaging in genital self-stimulation because it felt pleasurable when they were young. One of Carmen's (22, Latina, queer, atheist) "earliest memories" is of her grandmother "spanking" her for masturbating. Shalene (19, white, heterosexual, LDS) not only recalls being scolded by her mother for masturbating, but regularly being reprimanded by her siblings as well. They would say, "Don't do that ... Stop it. That's gross. Stop." Hence, Carmen and Shalene not only learned that engaging in bodily self-exploration is "wrong," but they developed an understanding that to desire and experience pleasure is "bad" and "disgusting" for girls as well.

These early warnings provided a "foundation" for girls' later understandings of "sexual function and its pleurability" (or lack thereof) (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002, 132), as they developed an understanding of masturbation as deeply shameful, embarrassing, and wrong, as well as something to hide. Celia, for example, credits this solitary incident with her mother with leading her to believe that "touching yourself 'there' was bad." Similarly, Yana believes that she

internalized the idea that “masturbation was like the most shameful thing ever ... horribly embarrass[ing] ... and ... wrong” because of her mother. Because the image of her grandmother punishing her for masturbating is one of the few memories she has from her early childhood, Carmen also feels that it taught her masturbation is “wrong” and therefore is something one “should do ... in secret.” In the same way, once Shalene realized that masturbation was not “okay” due to her family’s incessant admonishment, she “made it private.” While some girls made active efforts to not self-stimulate out of fear of their families’ negative reaction to their genital self-touching (regardless of its intentionality), many girls simply learned the importance of not being caught. Thus, they developed an understanding of female genitalia and pleasure in general as shameful and embarrassing, with masturbation as the ultimate secret.

### **Positive Messages**

A small minority of participants’ parents’ communicated positive messages about female sexuality and pleasure to them as they were growing up. In contrast to most parents, and most adults in general, these parents actually encouraged their daughters to seek out sexual knowledge and experience. In rare cases, parents (usually mothers) explicitly broached the topic of female masturbation and labeled it as a “healthy” or “normal” activity. In other cases, even if parents did not explicitly attempt to participate in normalizing female masturbation in this way, they did so implicitly by *not* avoiding the topic, by not labeling masturbation as “bad” or “wrong” when it came up in conversation or if they “caught” their daughter masturbating.

**Encouraging Sexual Exploration.** Instead of speaking about female sexuality solely in terms of fear and negative consequences, a few parents spoke about sex and pleasure in a positive light. They even encouraged and facilitated, rather than restricted, their daughters' intellectual and experiential sexual exploration (within limits). Deb's (22, white, lesbian, reform Jewish) family, for instance, spoke openly about sex with each other. Instead of denying that their daughters were sexual beings, their parents provided them with a safe space to talk or ask about "anything" sex-related without judgment. In contrast to most girls who were taught *not* to have sex until marriage, for example, Deb's father specifically told her and her sisters that they *should* have sex before they get married (when they were "old enough"). Because she grew up in such a "sex-positive" environment, Deb "never felt like there was shame or like sex is this bad thing we don't talk about." In the same vein, during adolescence Skyler's (19, white, heterosexual, spiritual) mother told her "I'm not one of those moms that's going to pretend like it's not happening ... I'm telling you, I want you to have a happy, healthy sex life." Like Deb, because sexuality was discussed openly and positively (instead of demonized), Skyler feels like she has a "much better sex life" and does *not* possess the sex- and masturbation-related "shame and fear" that she believes she would have likely experienced otherwise.

**Explicitly Contributing to the Normalization of Masturbation.** While most parents were too shy or "embarrassed" to talk about masturbation with their children (Elliott 2012, 34), a few participants' parents helped to normalize female masturbation by discussing the topic with their daughters as a healthy and normal

sexual activity. When Julia's (24, white, heterosexual, non-religious) parents caught her masturbating in public as a child, for example, instead of telling her that masturbation is "bad," they said, "It's cool if you do that and it probably feels good and that's fine, but you just shouldn't do that when other people are around." As a result, Julia was "not afraid to masturbate" and continued to do so pleurably throughout her childhood and adolescence into adulthood. In this way, it is apparent how the "lessons" parents convey to girls through their "reactions to genital stimulation" can be "destructive" or "helpful" (Abramson and Pinkerton 132). Christina's (21, Cuban, bisexual, atheist) mother was similarly "open" to talking about masturbation, relaying that masturbation is "normal" and "whatever you do in the privacy of your bedroom is your business." Correspondingly, Christina has always felt "really comfortable" with her body and sexuality.

Beyond speaking about female masturbation positively, a few girls' mothers even encouraged their daughters' to sexually self-explore. When Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist) was sixteen, for example, her mother told her that she *should* learn "how" to masturbate. Going a step further, when Marianna (20, Armenian/Filipino, heterosexual, Armenian Orthodox) told her mother that she has not had an orgasm and does not "really know what that is," her mother provided an explanation and a book for Marianna to read on the topic. Her mother told her, "You can read this. I have nothing to hide. Go for it. Read. Explore it." After Marianna later experienced her first orgasm through masturbation and told her mother about it, her mother responded, "Oh, I'm so proud." Marianna reports that she feels "freer" and less

“constricted” to talk about and explore her sexuality independently and with a partner as a result.

**Implicitly Contributing to the Normalization of Masturbation.** Some parents implicitly participated in normalizing female masturbation for their daughters by *not* chastising them when they were caught masturbating. While they did not explicitly acknowledge that masturbation is healthy and normal, they did not explicitly indicate that it is “bad” or a behavior to be stopped either. Karla’s (19, Mexican, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) mother, for example, once sent her a text message saying, “You need to be quieter” while Karla was masturbating. Even though Karla was mortified, and insists that masturbation is a “personal thing” that she would never want to talk about with her mother, because her mother acknowledged her masturbation without labeling it as “bad,” Karla did *not* develop an understanding of female masturbation as necessarily wrong or gross. A different example, when she was young, Becky’s (20, white, heterosexual, reform Jewish) family often joked about the pleasure her and her sister took in “humping” pillows and dolls. Instead of telling them to stop, her family humorously labeled this activity “the peepee dance.” Even though they did not officially sanction this behavior, because they did not specifically prohibit it either, “it was just accepted.” As Becky later came to understand and experience “humping” as a form of sexual self-pleasure, in contrast to many girls whose families explicitly chastised them for genital self-stimulation, she did *not* associate it as negative or view it as something that must be kept private or hidden.



## Silence

In most cases, girls whose parents remained largely silent on the topic of female masturbation ingrained the idea that female self-pleasure is bad or shameful precisely because it was *not* explicitly discussed or acknowledged. Brittany (21, white, heterosexual, atheist Catholic), for example, says “There is a conflict with porn and masturbation just from the fact that my parents didn’t talk about it at all, so they’re setting that precedent that it’s bad by not even talking about it or acknowledging it.” Piper (21, Native American/white, lesbian, atheist) also felt “weird,” “guilty,” and “shameful” about masturbation as a result of not being able to talk to her family about it when she was younger. She says, “It’s just one of those self-perpetuating things ... Everyone’s thinking about it but no one talks about it.” Natalie’s (20, white, heterosexual, culturally Catholic) parents similarly made masturbation feel “kind of dirty” because they “refused” to talk about it. Like Piper, Natalie felt “guilty” for even “trying” to masturbate, like “Oh, I shouldn’t do that. I’m doing something wrong.”

Even if they did not develop an understanding of female masturbation as “bad” or “wrong,” their parents’ silence around the topic led many girls to believe that masturbation should be hidden or a secret. Camille (27, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for example, says “I don’t know if I was ever given the message that [masturbation] was bad or good. It was just not talked about. But I think I knew when I was younger that it was ... supposed to be a secret.” Even when parents provided girls with resources (e.g. a book) for acquiring sexual knowledge, they still often learned that pleasure, especially self-pleasure, is embarrassing and not

something to be spoken about with others. Ana (25, Latina, heterosexual, no religion), for instance, says:

We didn't really talk about [sex and pleasure] in the house, and I was embarrassed to, but my mother very much believed in knowledge, so she would give me books. I'd read these books. Then for me, I don't know if I just equated being given something and not having it be verbally said, that I wasn't supposed to talk about it ... It would embarrass me.

Leah (19, white, heterosexual, conservative Jewish) similarly recalls that her mother did not speak to her directly about sexual pleasure. Instead, her mother provided her with a book about sex, including masturbation, with the hope that the book "would take care of it." Hence, even in "sex-positive" families it is apparent how parents may "inadvertently send bewildering or conflicting messages about sex to their children" (Abramson and Pinkerton 131). Even though their mothers took the initiative to provide them with access to reliable information about sex and pleasure (which is significantly more than most participants' parents did to facilitate their daughters' healthy sexual development), Ana and Leah still learned that female (self-) pleasure is something embarrassing and not to be discussed with others. Contradictorily, while they were able to develop an understanding of female pleasure as healthy and normative, they were still burdened by the conception that it is something to be embarrassed about, and to keep secret. Carmen's (22, Latina, queer, atheist) description of her childhood masturbation experiences illustrates how many of these girls felt about masturbation as a result of it *not* being explicitly spoken about:

It's something that ... I associated with secrecy, having to be quiet ... or something associated with being sneaky or trying to hide. So it's never something I felt bad about doing, like I never felt guilty or ashamed, but I

think only embarrassed to the extent that I felt like I shouldn't be doing it or was supposed to be hiding or more embarrassing about potentially being caught.

In this way, even girls and young women who do *not* receive explicitly negative messages about female (self-) pleasure still often develop an understanding of masturbation as potentially embarrassing and thus something to “hide” from others.

### **Religious Communities**

Because schools and parents were largely silent on the topic of female sexuality and pleasure, for many participants their religious community served as the most primary and consistent source of information about these topics. With that said, religious communities were overwhelmingly the largest source of prohibitive sexuality messages for participants. Religious leaders and texts, fellow congregants, and family members (as discussed above) consistently conveyed that healthy sexuality is limited to heterosexual marital penile-vaginal intercourse, that women should be pure and restrained, and that (male) masturbation is a forbidden sin. Hence, a significant number of girls not only internalized the idea that female sexual desire and pleasure in general is morally wrong, but that masturbation is particularly sinful for girls (in comparison with boys).

### **Healthy Sexuality Limited to Heterosexual Marital Context**

One primary sexuality discourse disseminated through religious communities was that healthy sexuality can only exist between a man and a woman

within marriage. Di (27, Chixan@/Mestizo/brown, queer, atheist)<sup>25</sup>, for example, recalls how the nuns at her Catholic school explained, “The best thing you can do is abstain until you get married and then have sex only for reproduction.” Di says that the notion that sex was solely for reproductive purposes was “always ... a given.” Consistent with historical theological perspectives which consider the enjoyment of even procreative sex a sin, some girls were taught that anything other than “pleasureless reproductive intercourse” violates the Christian sexual ideal (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002, 16). Kylie (21, white, female-attracted, non-denominational Christian), for instance, remembers receiving the message that any type of “lust” (even within marriage) is “sexually unhealthy” and sinful. Dani’s (18, black/white, heterosexual, Catholic) church similarly “condemned ... anything pleasurable” as “bad.” Thus, these girls internalized a general “sex is bad” message – that any type of non-marital, non-procreative sexuality, and pleasure in general, is sinful.

Some girls, however, learned through their religious communities that sex *will* be pleasurable in the future when they are married. Elisa (18, white/Mexican, heterosexual, culturally Catholic), for instance, recalls learning in a class entitled “In God’s Image” that “sex should be saved for marriage” because “it’s a pleasurable thing that should be between a man and a wife.” While marital pleasure was not spoken about as negatively as it was in many other girls’ religious communities,

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<sup>25</sup> Because Di identifies as “female-bodied” and not as a “woman,” I use the term “female-bodied individual” instead of “woman,” as well as “they/their” (rather than “she/her”) pronouns, when relaying Di’s feelings and experiences.

Elisa still received the message that any kind of pre-marital sexual desire or pleasure is morally wrong and a potential threat to marriage and family.

### **Cult of Pure Womanhood**

Girls belonging to Christian-based faiths in particular were socialized to believe in the post-nineteenth century ideal of women as sexually innocent and pure, controlled and restrained. They were taught to associate asexuality with being a “good” woman, “the kind of woman a good girl should wish to be” (Coontz 2005, 159). According to Ashley (21, white, heterosexual, LDS), the notion that girls and young women should aspire to be “morally clean” and “sexually pure” was an important component of the discussion that sexuality is “something sacred to be saved for marriage.” In addition to learning to keep their thoughts and selves “clean,” according to Shalene (19, white, heterosexual, LDS), girls are taught to “respect [their] bodies” by “dressing modestly, so that the guy can have an easier time controlling himself.” In this way, many girls raised within conservative Christian-based religious communities were taught that their purity should help men to curb their sexual desires. By constructing women’s (a)sexuality solely in relation to male sexual desire and behavior, this “cult of pure womanhood” also dictated that a “true” woman would never seek out sexual independence (Coontz 2005, 160).

Owing to such messages, many girls accept the idea that men are more innately sexual than women. To this day, Ashley, for example, does not think that adolescent girls “have quite the same sexual urges” as adolescent boys. Katelyn (24, white, heterosexual, LDS) similarly supposes that this difference exists because men

and women have “different desires” deriving from their different “composition” and “chemical makeup.” She believes “it’s divinely instated that men have ... desire because it helps us to have families and children.” In this manner, girls like Ashley and Katelyn learn to accept the double standard that boys and men are allowed and supposed to be sexual beings, while girls and women are not. Furthermore, girls learn when they are eventually allowed to be “sexual,” that it should only be in the context of a romantic, emotional relationship (ideally with their husband once married). They come to believe that women’s sexual desires and experiences (if existent at all) should always revolve around their male partner. Moreover, because they are taught that a man should be central to their experience of sexuality, they assume that pleasure should always be “given” to them by a man (and his penis).

### **Masturbation as Forbidden Sin**

In addition to negative prohibitive messages about sexuality and female morality in general, many girls were also explicitly taught that masturbation is prohibited and a sin. The Catholic Church, for example, considers masturbation as a “morally disordered act” because engaging in any kind of sexuality “outside normal marital relations” violates the principles of “mutual giving and human procreation” (Van Driel 2012, 156-167). Because masturbation is “talked about in the New Testament as ... being ... ‘one of the sins’,” Carrie (20, white, heterosexual, Evangelical Christian), for example, thinks about masturbation as an “old time ... old world ... wrong.” According to Mark Malan and Vern Bullough (2005), because the Mormon (LDS) Church inundates its members with the slogan “better dead clean, than alive unclean” (through official Church publications, in youth groups, and so

on), youth learn to abstain from masturbation at all costs because it is a major causal factor which “makes an individual morally ‘unclean’” (100-101). Thus, girls like Hope (20, white, heterosexual, LDS) also solely learned about masturbation from their church as “something that you don’t do.” Moreover, they learned that the consequences of “arousing” such “emotions” in their own bodies and violating “the will of God” might include “acquiring a burden of guilt and sin” and “a shattered life,” for instance (Malan and Bullough 2005, 102-103).

When spoken about in this prohibitive manner, masturbation was almost always referred to (or assumed to be referred to) in a specifically male context. Casey (21, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for instance, remembers that “touching yourself” was discussed as a sin at her church camp. However, she recalls that it was primarily “geared towards guys.” Likewise, Kylie (21, white, female-attracted, non-denominational Christian) remembers that the primary message for guys was “don’t masturbate,” whereas girls were simply told “don’t have sex.” Within her Orthodox Jewish community, Lauren (20, white, heterosexual) similarly learned that masturbation is “forbidden for guys,” without female masturbation being addressed.

**Masturbation as “Gateway” Sin and Addiction.** Masturbation was further discussed as a “gateway” sin, as a sexual activity that might lead one to eventually engage in other prohibited forms of sexuality, such as pre-marital or homosexual sex, or viewing pornography. This idea was rooted in the belief that once introduced to sexual pleasure through masturbation, that individuals would possess more sexual desire. According to many participants, it was a common concern within their

religious communities that individuals might be overcome by the need to fulfill this desire and thus not only resort to pursuing self-pleasure, but partnered pleasure as well. Ashley (21, white, heterosexual, LDS) shares what she learned in church about the dangers of masturbation:

There's this book that we have in the church ... called "The Miracle of Forgiveness." ... It talks about sexual sins a lot, and it talked about masturbation and how when you engage in that behavior it can often times lead to mutual masturbation, which can then lead to homosexuality or homosexual behaviors. And so it was basically saying, "Don't arouse those emotions within yourself, because it can have more serious consequences down the road."

Hence, masturbation was considered to be especially sinful and dangerous because of its addictive properties. Samira (22, Iraqi-American, heterosexual, Muslim) learned that masturbation addiction is prohibited within Islam "because once you get addicted to it, once you're married, you know no other way of having sex." She says, "If you form the habit of having masturbation as your form of pleasure, then once you get married you can't switch yourself." In this way, masturbation is largely conceptualized within conservative religious communities as selfish and a potential threat to one's (current or future) marital relationship.

Additionally, as Alison (19, white, asexual, Baptist) says, masturbation is frequently "a subtext in the 'porn is bad' message" in religious communities. According to Kylie (21, white, female-attracted, non-denominational Christian), when discussing "overcoming" their pornography and masturbation addictions boys in her church often say things like: "I used to watch pornography and I was a terrible person and my life was dark and bleak. And now I have Jesus and I don't watch porn and I'm much better. And sometimes I struggle with it and it's a horrible



struggle. And I'm just a sinful person, but thank God I'm able to overcome it." In this way, the sin of masturbation and pornography "addiction" was frequently addressed as an exclusively male problem. It was often acknowledged that boys and men struggle with such addictions, but these discussions were generally not considered to apply to girls or women. Ashley (21, white, heterosexual) explains how the men in her LDS church are gathered for a "big meeting" about the detriments of pornography every six months. Similarly, Shalene (19, white, heterosexual, LDS) says that "pornography and masturbation is something that [her] church talks about directed towards men because ... they struggle with it more." In other words, the church "usually end[s] up talking to [women] about virtue and chastity and men about pornography and self-control."

### **Resulting Assumptions about Female Masturbation**

As a result of internalizing the idea that any kind of female sexual desire or pleasure is morally wrong, girls raised with a strong religious influence tended to associate sexuality in general with shame and guilt. Di (27, Chixan@/Mestizo/brown, queer, atheist), for instance, "internalized a lot of shame-y notions about pleasure." Kylie (21, white, female-attracted, non-denominational Christian) similarly felt guilty when she developed the "awareness" that she is "a sexual person." For this reason, and because it threatens the institution of marriage and the role of procreation as the "ultimate function" of sex (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002, 6-7), these girls came to understand masturbation as particularly shameful and sinful. Ciara (30, white, heterosexual, Catholic), for instance, always assumed that masturbation was "dirty" and sinful because she was taught that "sex

[is] for procreation.” Because they are explicitly and repeatedly told that masturbation is a sin and a threat to the institutions of marriage and family, these girls internalize the idea that masturbation is a dirty, selfish, morally wrong, and ultimately shameful behavior even further.

In addition, because the dominant prohibitive discourses about masturbation within religious communities primarily revolve around male desires and struggles, girls learn that men are (and are expected to be) *more* innately sexual and possess *less* self-control than women. Girls believe that they are (and should be) held to a higher standard of moral virtue, purity, and self-restraint. For example, because Ashley’s (21, white, heterosexual) LDS church sends the message to boys “you’re okay to be sexual,” she believes that guys can “get away with more” in regards to sexuality. Ciara (30, white, heterosexual, Catholic) similarly says:

I think men are constantly flooded with this idea that they’re supposed to want sex all the time and ... even if you’re in a religious situation where you’re taught it’s bad, you’re still sort of, “Oh, that’s okay, go to confession.” I think of one gender it’s expected and the other it’s not. And you’re thought of as sexually deviant if you do as a girl.

Because they learn that girls are (and should be) largely asexual, and because female masturbation is often *not* specifically addressed, girls tend to assume that masturbation is less natural and common among women (if existent at all). Katelyn (24, white, heterosexual, LDS), for instance, thinks, “guys my age are probably more inclined to masturbate.” She believes that masturbation is “something that guys might have a harder time overcoming the desire to do.” Brooke (22, white, heterosexual, LDS) also agrees that masturbation is not “nearly as big a problem for women.” Carrie (20, white, heterosexual, Evangelical Christian) even concedes that

masturbation may be a “good” mechanism for helping “Christian guys who are waiting to have sex until marriage” because they would be unlikely to control their sexual urges otherwise. Thus, girls like Katelyn, Brooke, and Carrie are socialized into a masturbation double standard at an early age through their religious communities – to the idea that masturbation is “unnatural” for women, and consequently that the moral and social consequences of female self-pleasure are (and should be) more severe.

Girls whose religious communities did *not* explicitly discuss masturbation (whether male or female) at all still often developed an understanding of female masturbation as sinful and wrong. Paired with other messages which prohibit non-reproductive sexuality and extol female moral virtue, they frequently interpreted the *silence* around female pleasure as evidence that female pleasure, and self-pleasure in particular, is morally wrong. At Nikki’s (19, African-American, heterosexual) non-denominational Christian church, for instance, “Pleasure was definitely not something that was talked about ... That was like a forbidden sin because they felt if they tell you how to please, then you’d go out and engage [in sex] and that’s not what they were about.” Due to this silence around pleasure, Nikki internalized the idea that female masturbation is physically and morally disgusting and wrong. She learned that masturbation “was something ... you’re not supposed to do, that it’s horrible and you can’t talk about it.”

### **Peers**

Because of the lack of information provided to girls about their sexual bodies through “reliable” sources of knowledge such as schools and parents, and the clear

sex-negative bias in messages communicated through religious communities, discussions about female sexuality among peers have become an important source of information about female desire and pleasure. In contrast to the messages girls receive about sexuality from most adults, peers tend to valorize the experience of partnered female (hetero)sexuality. Girls rarely recalled hearing male or female peers discuss female masturbation. When masturbation was discussed, it was almost always in a male context. For this reason, most girls developed a significantly more clear and positive understanding of male masturbation than female masturbation. When the topic of female masturbation did occasionally arise among peers, it was usually discussed in a negative light. The few girls who did report having positive conversations about female masturbation with peers primarily did so with girls to whom they were related, such as sisters or cousins.

### **Silence**

Few participants remembered hearing about masturbation from their peers growing up. When they did hear about it, it was almost exclusively boys talking about male masturbation. Jenny (22, white, pansexual, spiritual) recalls that masturbation was only talked about in middle and high school “in the context of men or people with dicks jacking off.” She says, “There was no female anything.” Due to the existence of at least minimal discussion regarding male self-pleasure among their peers, in contrast to the utter silence around female self-pleasure, girls like Jenny assumed that masturbation is socially acceptable for men, but not women. As Connie (26, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) says, “Culturally, it’s very acceptable for men to do it and yet it’s never really talked about with women.

So I think ... by not talking about it, it's indirectly saying it's wrong or it's bad or it's dirty." Talking about masturbation with female peers continues to feel shameful and be a struggle for Connie to this day. She says, "It's kind of a 'don't ask, don't tell' kind of thing." Like Connie, because of this silence, Yvonne (20, Hispanic, bi-straight, Christian) also learned that masturbation is "something a man does ... that's ... dirty" and subsequently that it is not her "place" to masturbate.

**Male Masturbation as More Pleasurable.** As a result of hearing male peers talk about male masturbation, but never hearing female (or male) peers discuss female masturbation, some girls assumed that masturbation must be more pleasurable for men than women. Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for instance, shares her frustration that she did not learn that sexual pleasure is "as real" for girls as guys growing up: "You hear about 'guys masturbate all the time' and 'guys are all about sex all the time.' It's like that girls don't think about that or aren't driven by that or don't have those desires. It fosters this mindset that it's more enjoyable for guys or it's easier for guys." Like Kara, many girls also came to believe that masturbation is "easier" for men than women because of this silence. Lauren (20, white, heterosexual, Orthodox Jewish), for example, says:

I think guys, if they [masturbate] ... they probably do more and ... get more out of it. I think it's probably easier for guys ... I feel like guys probably have more experience with it just because that's ... how it is. I think it's expected that guys when they're growing up, they kind of come into that. They just kind of discover it themselves.

Kara and Lauren presuppose that if girls masturbated and experienced sexual pleasure that they would discuss it as guys often do. Because they do not generally

hear girls engage in such conversations, if ever, they subsequently assume that male masturbation is more common, pleasurable, and “easy” than female masturbation.

**Male Masturbation as “Easier.”** The fact that they are aware of the existence of a discourse around male masturbation, but not female masturbation, leads these girls to believe that one of the reasons masturbation is “easier” for men is because it is more socially and physically accessible to them. Because they are viewed as possessing strong innate sexual urges, and consequently are granted more cultural permission to be sexual, boys are thought to be more open-minded and likely to sexually self-explore at a young age. Even though boys’ and girls’ “hormones are raging” in high school, Jenny (22, white, pansexual, spiritual) believes that boys are more “willing” to “experiment” with masturbating because it is more socially acceptable, and thus accessible, for them. Like Casey (21, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), many girls also tend to think that boys are less likely to feel embarrassed (if at all) if caught masturbating or watching pornography.

Many girls also perceive that masturbation is more accessible to boys than girls because boys regularly see their own penises, as well as hear other boys talk about their penises. Brooke (22, white, heterosexual, LDS), for example, believes that boys start masturbating at an earlier age because they have more “exposure” to their genitals than girls, because they are always “handling their penis” when they urinate. Molly (18, white, heterosexual, Lutheran) similarly thinks that boys are “all about” masturbating because their penis is just “there”; whereas girls “don’t have this thing annoying [them] all the time.” As a result, “girls have to conduct an active

search to find out what everything looks like down below” (Van Driel 2012, 12). When this (as is often the case) does not occur, Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual) says, many girls come to “think that their vaginas are very off-limits.” Unlike boys, girls’ instincts are to avoid looking at or touching their genital area at all. Accordingly, girls assume that most other girls are unlikely to be willing to sexually self-explore.

In contrast to most girls, who possess no information about how (or even if) other girls masturbate because girls generally do not discuss masturbation with each other, girls largely perceived that boys have access to important information that allows them to feel a sense of solidarity and normalcy with regard to their masturbatory behavior as a result of their (even joking) conversations. Piper (21, Native American/white, lesbian, atheist) explains how guys have it “easier” in this regard: “With guys it’s like they all go through the same thing, so they have this collective experience of how it is and they all go through this like, ‘oh yeah, that’s how that is’ and ‘that’s how that is.’ But with women it’s just so different.” Because few girls ever heard other girls speak about female masturbation, they generally had no idea if other girls masturbate, and if so, how many do and by what methods. In contrast with boys, who girls’ tended to presuppose all were aware that the majority of other boys masturbate (and in the same ways), girls frequently assumed that they were the only girl they know who masturbates. Karla (19, Mexican, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for example, says, “When I was younger, I thought [masturbation] was just a ‘me’ thing ... I didn’t know that other people did it ... It was just my secret.” Ava (21, white, heterosexual, no religion) similarly thought there

was something “wrong” with her because she was “unaware” about female masturbation and that other girls view pornography too. She says, “I assumed that I was the only one.” Hence, while many boys grow up with the shared awareness that their male peers also stimulate their genitals (and watch pornography), girls like Kara and Ava often feel isolated and “different” for engaging in this behavior.

**Girls Masturbate?** In some cases, because they only ever heard boys talking about masturbation, girls did not even understand that masturbation is something in which girls can and do engage. Carmen (22, Latina, queer, atheist), for instance, recalls hearing male classmates talk about masturbation on the playground in fifth grade: “Some guys were saying ‘jack off’ or ‘jerk off’, but I don't think I knew what that meant ... Even when I heard about boys masturbating, I didn't connect it to what I was doing.” Like Carmen, girls who began masturbating at an early age often did so without knowing that it was called “masturbation” or that the term “masturbation” did not solely apply to men. Instead, they had to rely primarily on their own exploration to learn how masturbation and pleasure “work.” Thus, for Alison (19, white, asexual, Baptist), like many other girls, masturbation was “just something that happened.” So, unlike boys, who often heard others talk about male masturbation before or during their early stages of sexual self-exploration, many girls masturbated for a significant length of time without knowing what it “is” or that it is something other girls also experience. Even though they did not consciously connect their behavior with the term “masturbation” or sexuality in general, many girls nevertheless possessed a strong sense that what they were doing was wrong or shameful. They assumed that their behavior must be “bad”



precisely because it feels good and no one talks about it. As Kara says, “It wasn’t even sexually charged. It was just ‘that feels good.’ I felt bad. And I don’t know why or how and where that came from, but ... the entire thing felt bad.”

### **Prohibitive Messages**

When the topic of female masturbation did occasionally arise, it was almost always in a negative context. Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) recalls a time where classmates made fun of an unpopular, “sketchy” girl by labeling her as a “masturbator”: “Someone said ... ‘Oh man, did you hear that ... she masturbates in the shower?’ And it was like, ‘Eww, oh my God!’ And it became this ‘that’s so weird.’ That was the only time that term has even come up in terms of girls in situations like that. It was this whole like ‘Oh man, that’s weird. Gross. Why would she do that?’” Like Kara, most participants only heard about masturbation in a female context from peers as “weird,” “gross,” or “dirty.” Sophie (20, white, heterosexual, agnostic), for instance, recalls how her friends once asked her, “Do you masturbate?” And then immediately responded, “Oh my God, I don’t. It’s so scary ... It’s really dirty.” Girls like Kara and Sophie learn from these kinds of conversations that masturbation is highly socially unacceptable, disgusting, and embarrassing for women. They believe that masturbation is “bad” and only for pathetic, desperate girls. According to Natalie (20, white, heterosexual, culturally Catholic), for instance, “[Masturbation] just wasn’t something you did. It was unladylike. Maybe like a freak.” Because Jamie (21, white, heterosexual, spiritual) was similarly under the impression that most girls in her middle school thought masturbation was “gross,” she “adopted th[e] belief” that she “shouldn’t do that.” In addition, she thought, “it’s like a man’s job ...

he should be doing it.” In this way, many girls came to believe that masturbation is sort of a “last resort” for girls who are not attractive or likable enough to “get a man.” As Inez (19, Hispanic, heterosexual, no religion) says, “It’s ... shameful to say that you’re masturbating rather than just having sex, because ... you got to go please yourself ... You don’t have a partner.” Thus, it appears that young people often frame female masturbation in a negative context because it poses a challenge to heteronormative ideals of adolescent female sexuality – primarily that girls should desire to have sex and experience pleasure (if at all) with boys.

As a result of such negative messages from peers, those girls who already masturbate often developed a newfound sense of shame or embarrassment. Shalene (19, white, heterosexual, LDS), for example, possesses a strong memory of the first, and last time, she ever told a friend that she masturbates: “I told a friend ... and she thought I was gross ... I remember as soon as I told her and as soon as her reaction, my first thought was ‘Oh, I can’t tell anyone ever again.’ That was when I was six years old.” Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish) similarly explains that she would have “hands down ... lied ... through her teeth” about masturbating during the “vicious middle school years” because “there’s no way you could ever admit that and get out of there alive.” Thus, it is through conversations with peers that many girls learn to fear the social consequences of being labeled as a “masturbator,” and to subsequently keep their solitary sexual desires and behaviors a secret at all costs.

## Positive Messages

The few exceptions where participants learned about female pleasure and masturbation as positive from peers were usually through a close female relative, such as a cousin or sister. Casey (21, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for instance, recalls incorrectly asking her cousin what a “glitoris” was after hearing the term in a rap song. Her cousin responded by telling her that the “clitoris” is “what makes sex feel good for women.” Dani (18, black/white, heterosexual, Catholic) similarly learned about female masturbation for the first time from her older cousin’s friend at a slumber party. She said, “It’s when you touch yourself and it feels good and you can orgasm from it.” Karla (19, Mexican, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) even discovered masturbation while bathing with her cousins as a child. One of her cousins commented, “Oh, that feels good when you put your vagina up against the water.” They then each “took turns” stimulating their genitals with the water pressure from the faucet. Karla reflects, “I don’t think we knew what it was, we just knew it felt good.”

In rare cases, female siblings played an important role in normalizing female masturbation for participants. Becky (20, white, heterosexual, reform Jewish) and her sister, for instance, felt comfortable discussing independent and partnered pleasure with one another. For example, in the past Becky has asked, “Lizzy, right before bed, have you ever done something or felt something around your vagina and it’s felt good?” Becky says, “We usually agree about what feels good!” Another example, Deb (22, white, lesbian, reform Jewish) describes her sister as “masturbation evangelical” because she so frequently asked, “Have you masturbated

this week? Why not?" Because their mother died when Deb was young, she says that her sister took on a "motherly" role and wanted to ensure that Deb was "exploring [her]self healthily." She would always reiterate, "This is something you should be doing and if you have questions you should ask." Because Becky and Deb both had someone with whom they could speak openly about masturbation as they were growing up, they were able to develop a more positive understanding of masturbation than the many girls who felt they could not speak about it with anyone.

The perceived unbreakable ties of a familial relationship appear to allow a minority of girls to feel comfortable to broach the topic of female pleasure and masturbation without the same risk of being socially stigmatized as by other non-related peers. For Casey, for instance, the conversation she had with her cousin about the clitoris was the first time that she understood that there was a "pleasure component" for sex for women. These conversations with "safe" female peers provided girls with an important sense of solidarity and normalcy with regard to their sexuality. Becky explains how it feels to be able to talk about masturbation with her sister:

It's like "Wow, I'm not alone or weird or a freak!" Which I think that idea kind of surrounds female masturbation, but I don't know why. I think that girls feel like they're some kind of strange person for doing it. And I don't talk about it ... with many of my friends. I think you have to be pretty comfortable with someone to talk about masturbation.

Therefore, through these conversations girls learn to associate sex with pleasure. They also learn about masturbation, how to masturbate, and most importantly, that masturbation is something that girls do. Even more, they are able to develop a sense

of camaraderie with other girls that may help them to feel more comfortable and confident to seek out more information on masturbation, as well as to try masturbating.

### **Mainstream Media**

Given the lack of positive information about female sexuality available to girls through “legitimate” sources such as parents, school, and religious communities, representations and discussions about female sexuality in the media have also become a significant source of sexual information for girls. Similar to the messages most girls receive from peers, the media tends to valorize the experience and performance of partnered female (hetero)sexuality. As in sexual education, because female and male images are almost always paired together in representations of sexuality in the media, girls learn that “women and men are necessary counterparts” (Fields 2008, 113). Any kind of non-heterosexual or Other-oriented sexual desire or behavior is rendered invisible or abnormal. Such messages ultimately limit girls’ options for “healthy” sexual expression.

While many participants recalled viewing representations or hearing discussions about male masturbation in popular media, few had ever seen any depictions of female masturbation. Hence, most girls learned that masturbation is a “guy thing.” Most girls did remember learning about female pleasure in general through the media though, in the sense that it is something one should desire and be “good” at with and for a male partner. As a result, most girls received competing messages about female pleasure from the media – on the one hand, that pleasure is not something girls do or should pursue (especially alone), and on the other, that

girls should be knowledgeable about and good at receiving and giving pleasure (with men).

## **Silence**

The overwhelming majority of participants never saw any representations or heard any discussions about masturbation in popular media as they were growing up. While partnered sex scenes were rampant, solitary pleasure was rarely, if ever, depicted. As Kayla (21, African-American, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) says, “Sex is everywhere, but masturbation isn’t ... talked about.” Owing to the vast discrepancy in partnered versus solitary sex scenes in popular media, girls tended to assume that masturbation is significantly less common (if existent at all) and less pleasurable in contrast to partnered sex. Lauren (20, white, heterosexual, Orthodox Jewish) explains how the absence of representations of masturbation in the media affected her:

I think that does affect people because you never see it. You see people having sex all the time. Every movie they have to have sex. That’s the end goal. In the love stories they have sex. But they never say anything about yourself really. I mean I just don’t see it. I think that does portray [masturbation] as “if it’s not there, it doesn’t exist” or “it’s a weird thing” if you do it.

It is through such representations that young women like Lauren learn that partnered (hetero)sex is the “ultimate” sexual option for women.

**Masturbation as a “Guy Thing.”** When masturbation was represented it was almost always in a male context. Participants repeatedly cited the male masturbation scene from the movie *American Pie* as epitomizing how masturbation is represented in the media. Lauren says “I don’t think [masturbation’s] really

addressed much ... I think they make it jokingly about guys in *American Pie* movies ... but I don't see it much other than that." The young women with whom I spoke consistently believed that masturbation is taboo in popular culture, with the only exception being when it is represented in a humorous manner, like *American Pie*. As Sophie (20, white, heterosexual, agnostic) says, "Most Hollywood films will not depict masturbation. If they do, it's a joke or it's just taboo." Because male masturbation was often depicted as funny, pathetic, or gross in this way, girls frequently developed an understanding of masturbation as a highly unfeminine, and exclusively male, behavior. As Carmen (22, Latina, queer, atheist) says, "In movies or shows, it's just men that are comedic or gross, like gross humor or college humor. And not something that's ever depicted with women or girls." Hence, masturbation was largely assumed to be "bad" and "something guys do."

In this way, seeing representations or discussions of male masturbation (but not female masturbation) in popular media imbued the overwhelming majority of participants with a sense of certainty that all boys and men masturbate. As a result, they came to view the concept of masturbation as universally male. Brooke (22, white, heterosexual, LDS), for instance, asked in our interview, "I don't know what the word is for female masturbation. Is it just still 'masturbation'?" Julia (24, white, heterosexual, non-religious) explains why she, and most girls, generally associate masturbation with men: "Holding a penis in your hand and moving your hand up and down – that's the universal sign for masturbation." She then mimicked what she considers to be a female masturbation motion with her hands and said, "This doesn't mean anything to anybody." Because mainstream cultural representations of

masturbation tend to revolve around the penis in this way, even after learning that masturbation was something that girls can do, many girls did not possess an understanding of what they means logistically. Brittany (21, white, heterosexual, atheist Catholic), for example, recalls, “For men I had some sort of understanding. I really had no understanding of female masturbation. Like, they don’t have a penis, so what are they supposed to do?” What is more, due to this gender disparity in representations of masturbation, some girls did not even know that masturbation was a term that could apply to women. Becky (20, white, heterosexual, reform Jewish), for instance, did not know that it was “possible” for a girl to masturbate. Skyler (19, white, heterosexual, spiritual) similarly shares how “shocked” she was to discover that female masturbation exists given her prolonged and frequent exposure to popular media:

I knew the term masturbation, and I knew that boys did it, but I had no idea for the longest time that girls could masturbate. Like I thought it was a guy only act ... I remember when I found out that girls could do that too, and that it was also called masturbation. Like it wasn’t even a separate thing! It’s the same thing. And I think it’s so funny that, because if I as the girl that I was in middle school or younger, watching TV and watching movies and listening to music, understood masturbation for guys, than it just goes to show that that’s something that’s seen and done and everyone kind of knows what it is. But it took me a long time to figure out that girls could do it too.

Hence, it appears that it is not just the absence, but rather the relative lack of representations of girls or women self-stimulating in mainstream media in comparison with boys or men that leads many girls and young women to develop a solely male-oriented understanding of the term “masturbation.”

In some cases, representations of or discussions about male masturbation in popular media could have a positive, normalizing effect on understandings of female



masturbation. Cole (20, Asian/Hispanic, female-attracted, Buddhist/Christian), for instance, initially learned about the term masturbation from a song by the band “Green Day.” Beforehand, Cole had always thought that masturbation was “weird,” that “no one else did it,” and that no one else “could feel that way if they did those things.” After hearing the band refer to masturbation as “fun” in one of their songs, however, Cole looked up the term “masturbation” in the dictionary. Then, Cole realized, “Oh, that sounds something like what I do.” Like so, Cole learned that masturbation is a common behavior for men and women, and not “weird” or abnormal as previously thought. Hence, it appears that any representations or discussions of masturbation in the media, even if primarily in a male context, may help to normalize female masturbation for girls. Just exposing girls to the term “masturbation” may pique their interest and inspire them to research the concept on their own. As in Cole’s case, they may then find solace in the knowledge that masturbation is a common behavior for all genders.

For the overwhelmingly majority of participants, as a result of developing an understanding of masturbation as primarily male, masturbation was solely associated with (often negative) masculine characteristics. For example, because Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) connected masturbation with “guys being kind of dirty, jerks ... shallow” when she was younger, she concluded that masturbation is “not a girl thing to do.” Casey (21, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) similarly thought of masturbation as “gross.” She says, “I think of old men. I think of like porn. Old men looking at porn.” Girls often further concluded that masturbation is particularly unfeminine or “unladylike” because

they so closely associated it with male pornography consumption in this way. Like Ashley (21, white, heterosexual, LDS), due to popular representations of male masturbation that frequently include pornography, many girls believed that “pornography goes hand in hand with masturbation.” As follows, most girls were socialized to view male masturbation as dirty, gross, and degrading. Thus, there was no question for most girls that female masturbation would be “bad” and “dirty” as well.

Because they were generally only exposed to representations and discussions of male masturbation, girls tended to possess a much clearer understanding of male masturbation than female masturbation. For Jenny (22, white, pansexual, spiritual), for example, “it was way easier to conceptualize male masturbation than female masturbation, because ... you see ... in the media ... the teen boy jacking off ... and getting walked in on and stuff ... and like for women, it’s like this ... secret, mystic sort of thing.” Female masturbation was also a “foreign idea” to Becky (20, white, heterosexual, reform Jewish) as she was growing up, because there was so much emphasis on boys masturbating in the media, but not girls. Not only did she believe that guys masturbate “a lot more” than girls, but she had “more of ... an understanding of how guys masturbate, and ... what it means to have done it.” Like Jenny, Becky came to possess a stronger conception of male, rather than female, genital physiology and pleasure as a result.

**Male Masturbation as Socially Acceptable.** Girls also developed the belief that masturbation is significantly more common and socially acceptable for men than for women. Because male masturbation is “all over the place” in the media,

Emily (20, white, heterosexual, culturally Lutheran), for instance, thought that men would feel less masturbation “guilt” because “the media encourages it so much” and “it’s a given” for men. She says, “it’s played out as this thing that women never do, but guys do all the time and every single guy does everyday.” Luz (21, Hispanic, heterosexual, Catholic) similarly believes that masturbation is considered “just another ... guy thing” because men’s sexuality is “more out there.” Based on this message that guys are more “allowed” to be open about and engage in masturbation, girls commonly believed that there is significantly less stigma attached to male masturbation (and sexuality in general) in contrast to female masturbation, if existent at all. Maggie (18, white, heterosexual, Christian), for instance, says, “For women, [masturbation] has really bad connotations. Like men, it’s acceptable. They do it all the time.” Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual) echoes this sentiment by saying, “Boys were doing it since the dawn of time.” Because of popular representations which suggest that masturbation is a more innate and universal desire and behavior for boys in contrast to girls, girls learn to fear the perceived social repercussions of masturbating.

**Masturbation as a Male “Right.”** Thanks to such representations, many girls viewed male masturbation as such a normative and ingrained behavior that they believed it would be abnormal for men *not* to masturbate. Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for example, says, “I assume every guy is [masturbating]. I would almost think it was weird if they weren’t doing that.” Sophie (20, white, heterosexual, agnostic) similarly feels that guys “have to” masturbate. As the same time, she supposes that it is “really abnormal for a girl.” So while they assumed that

it is unhealthy or abnormal for girls *to* masturbate, girls frequently simultaneously accepted the idea that it is unhealthy and abnormal for men to *abstain* from masturbating. Annemarie (27, white, “unlabeled” sexual identity, non-denominational Christian) even thinks of masturbation as “almost a right” for guys. Aracela (21, Hispanic, heterosexual, Catholic) explains why she believes male and female masturbation are not the “same thing”:

When I hear a man masturbating versus a woman masturbating ... to me it's completely different. It's ... one of those things like, “don't men have to do it?” Period. Because if they don't do it, like it hurts or something ... It's just like one of those things. It's like they have to do it ... Us, do we really have to do it, otherwise it's going to hurt? ... No.

Hence, popular representations of male sexuality and (self-) pleasure have led Aracela to accept a masturbation double standard – that self-stimulation is more socially acceptable and expected for men than women because they possess a biological “need” for self-pleasure that women lack.

### **Representations of Female Masturbation in Popular Media**

There were a few notable exceptions to the media silence around female masturbation. Discussions about or depictions of women using vibrators on the television show *Sex and the City* and in several recent films (e.g. *Not Another Teen Movie*, *The Ugly Truth*) were occasionally mentioned by participants as a source of female masturbation knowledge. Women's magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Seventeen*, however, were most frequently cited as sources of information for girls about female pleasure, including self-pleasure. Because female orgasm in the context of partnered sex was a particularly common topic in these magazines, girls were sometimes able to draw connections between descriptions of partnered

orgasm with orgasms they have experienced on their own. Leah (19, white, heterosexual, conservative Jewish), for instance, says, “I kind of realized when people [in *Seventeen*] described orgasm, that kind of described what I’d been feeling for forever. Just the idea of climax ... and having it.” In some cases, these magazines even explicitly discussed female masturbation as a normal, natural, healthy sexual activity. Emily (20, white, heterosexual, culturally Lutheran), for example, read in *Cosmopolitan* that masturbation’s “okay.” She learned, “You should do it. More women do it than people actually think.” Hence, Emily developed the understanding that masturbation can be “a good thing” and “empowering” for girls.

**(Partnered) Pleasure Imperative.** While such magazines served as an important source of information about female pleasure for girls, they also communicated the idea that girls and women *must* be good at sex and know how to experience, or at the very least, display orgasmic pleasure for their male partners. Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) explains what she learned about female pleasure in *Cosmopolitan*: “They talk about it as kind of understanding the guy and understanding how guys think.” She says that *Cosmopolitan* “kind of feeds this mindset that you have to have somebody else to have an orgasm.” Molly (18, white, heterosexual, Lutheran) similarly relays how the information about pleasure she has read in *Cosmopolitan* centers around how to please a man. She says, “They tell you what feels good and what doesn’t. Different ways to use your underwear to tease your man ... It revolves around how you ... should act to get men to pay attention to you.” Because it was such a “common thing,” girls like Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist) developed more comfort “discussing male pleasure” than

female pleasure. Furthermore, Shanna possessed a “singular mindset” that “pleasure is reached through vaginal intercourse.” In this way, the positive value of these magazines placing a high premium on female pleasure and orgasm (especially in contrast to other popular media outlets) was frequently outweighed by their valorization of partnered pleasure and vaginal, over clitoral, orgasm.

**Heterosexual Sex as the “Ultimate.”** Early solitary and partnered sexual experiences frequently felt disappointing to girls as a result of such cultural messages. For example, because of what Jamie (21, white, heterosexual, spiritual) had read in *Cosmopolitan*, she viewed sex as “something to look forward to ... something [she] should experience.” When she subsequently did not achieve orgasm during partnered sex, she felt like sex was “a let down” and “not as great as it should be.” She worried, “What’s wrong with me?” Ana (25, Latina, heterosexual, no religion) similarly learned through *Cosmopolitan* that “having sex or having an orgasm through sex is the ‘ultimate’.” Based on this assumption, even though she took pleasure in achieving orgasm through clitoral self-stimulation, she frequently pondered if there was something “wrong” with her for not being able to orgasm through penetration. In this way, she learned that “women aren’t supposed to take their pleasure in their own hands.” Thus, these girls not only felt an imperative to be “good” at having sex with men, but to achieve or show pleasure based on what gives men pleasure.

**Female Masturbation as a Threat to Male Sexual Prowess.** As a result of such Other-oriented messages about female desire and pleasure, most girls also came to assume that men conceive of female masturbation as a threat to their sexual

prowess. They would worry that if they masturbated, it might make a current or future partner feel emasculated. As Charlotte (18, white, heterosexual, atheist Catholic) says, “When guys masturbate it’s like blowing off steam, but when women do it ... if they have a partner, [guys] are like, ‘Oh, I’m not good enough for you?’” Naomi (21, white, heterosexual, agnostic Catholic) similarly shares the belief that guys feel “left out of the process” and “threatened” if their female partner uses a vibrator for self-stimulation, for example. In this way, girls learned to accept the sexual double standard that it is normal and natural for boys to masturbate while in a relationship, but unacceptable for girls.

## **Conclusion**

### **Discursive Silence**

The above narratives illustrate the extent to which discussions about and representations of female masturbation are absent in U.S. society. As shown throughout this chapter, because the minimal disruptions in this cultural silence generally frame female masturbation in a negative light, girls overwhelmingly interpret the *absence* of information or depictions of self-pleasure as evidence that female masturbation is deeply shameful, stigmatizing, and deviant. Furthermore, the *absence* of discourses around female masturbation and pleasure more generally in combination with the *presence* of discourses around male masturbation and pleasure results in girls almost universally internalizing and accepting a masturbation double standard.

For example, the *absence* of discussion about and representations of female pleasure in general through important early “reliable” sources of sexual

socialization, such as parents, religious institutions, and schools results in girls learning that female pleasure more generally is either non-existent or bad. In addition, because these sources tend to talk about female sexuality solely in the context of potential dangers, and rarely ever in terms of possible pleasures, girls come to fear sexual desire. In religious communities in particular, the *lack* of discourse around female pleasure leads girls to believe that it is especially sinful. What is more, because these sources do frequently generate discourses around male pleasure, girls often interpret the silence around female pleasure to mean that women are not as naturally or normally sexual as men. Girls learn from schools, parents, and peers through this silence that boys have more cultural permission to possess sexual desire and engage in sexual behavior than girls. In this fashion, girls are socialized to accept a general sexual double standard, which entitles boys to be sexual beings while simultaneously denying girls the same right.

The fact that teachers and parents do *not* speak about or provide representations of female self-pleasure specifically tells girls that female masturbation in particular is taboo and shameful. Because they understand this silence to be a result of these adults' discomfort with the topic, they come to believe that female masturbation is even worse than other sexuality topics which their teachers and parents are seemingly comfortable discussing (e.g. oral sex, penile-vaginal intercourse). This notion is even further cemented by the fact that girls generally are exposed to discourses around male masturbation (whether positive or prohibitive) through religious communities, peers, and the media. They interpret the comparative silence around female masturbation through these sources as



evidence that masturbation is more common, pleasurable, easy, and socially acceptable for men in contrast to women. The general absence of depictions or discussions of female solitary pleasure, weighed against the overwhelming amount of images of or conversations about partnered (hetero)sex, also teaches girls that masturbation is less common, less desirable, and less pleasurable than partnered sex for women. What is more, because they view masturbation as an innately male behavior (or in the case of many conservative religious communities, an innately male “struggle” or “addiction”), they assume that masturbation is “unfeminine” by default. They presuppose that the social consequences of masturbating are significantly more severe for women. Thus, they are socialized into a masturbation double standard: while masturbation is a male “right,” something that is abnormal for men *not* to do (or at the very least, a transgression for which men are entitled to atone or “overcome”), it is abnormal and “wrong” for girls *to* masturbate.

### **Explicitly Prohibitive Masturbation Discourses**

In addition to a dominant discourse of silence, the narratives presented in this chapter suggest the existence of two other masturbation-specific cultural discourses into which girls in the United States are primarily socialized: 1) Masturbation as sin, and 2) Female masturbation as (secular) stigma. The *implicit* prohibitive messages conveyed through the *lack* of discussions and representations referenced above compound with the *explicit* prohibitive messages girls receive about (self-) pleasure through these two discourses to significantly influence girls’ early understandings and experiences of female masturbation.

**Masturbation as Sin.** Many girls are socialized to believe that masturbation is morally wrong and a sin through their religious communities and families. The dangers of (male) masturbation addiction are often explicitly addressed by religious leaders or in religious texts, and often associated with or viewed as a “gateway” to other “deviant” sexual behaviors, such as pre-marital sex, pornography, and homosexuality. Accordingly, girls learn to view masturbation as not only a threat to the procreative function of sex, but as a general threat to the institutions of marriage and family. Because the virtues of purity and chastity are constantly glorified both at church and at home, Christian girls in particular come to perceive any sort of sexual desire or pleasure as a violation of these moral principles. As a result, they view giving in to sexual desire through a behavior like masturbation as evidence of a girl’s inability to exercise sexual restraint and control over her body, and evidence of her failure to adhere to her religious beliefs.

**Female Masturbation as (Secular) Stigma.** Even girls who are not exposed to explicitly prohibitive religious messages about female sexuality and (self-) pleasure develop a secular understanding of female masturbation as highly stigmatized and taboo. General prohibitive and “sex as danger” messages parents and schools convey teach girls to fear, rather than embrace, their sexual feelings and desires, as well as potential pleasures. Through what they explicitly *do* and *do not* say about female masturbation, parents, peers, and the media in particular communicate to girls that female masturbation is weird, dirty, gross, pathetic, and just generally socially unacceptable (especially in comparison with male masturbation). Girls also learn, primarily through the silence around the topic, that

masturbation is shameful and embarrassing, something to keep hidden and never speak about with others.

### **Heteronormative Discourses**

Lacking exposure to many female masturbation-specific representations or discussions early in life, girls are often left to make meaning of their own masturbatory desires and experiences, and develop an understanding of what constitutes “normal” and physically and psychologically “healthy” female sexuality based on the discourses that are available. Thus, in addition to the two masturbation-specific discourses described above, a more general discourse of heteronormativity also appears to significantly influence many participants’ conceptions of female masturbation, and in so doing, their feelings and experiences.

Through messages from multiple sources which advocate partnered (hetero)sexuality as the only psychologically and physically “healthy” context for female sexuality, girls learn that their (eventual) sexual desires and pleasures should revolve solely around their male partner’s (ideally husband’s) desires and pleasures rather than their own. Because partnered pleasure and orgasm through penile-vaginal intercourse is often valorized as the “ultimate,” rooted in the psychoanalytic legacy of sexual development, girls internalize the idea that the “best” pleasure is “given” to a woman by a man and his penis (versus clitoral stimulation) (Freud 1965). Because orgasm is constructed as a “gift” from a partner in this way, most girls come to understand orgasm and pleasure as something you “get” from another person (Fahs 2011a, 50-53), rather than something you “give”

yourself. Therefore, they come to view female masturbation as a threat to their male partner's sexual power, and their future heterosexual success.

A "pleasure imperative" embedded within this broader heteronormative discourse sends a seemingly contradictory message to girls about their bodies and pleasure which also influences how think about and experience masturbation. While previously the desiring or pleasure-experiencing female sexual body was constructed as "deviant," in recent years a pleasure or orgasm imperative has emerged within popular discourse. Because representations of sex in the mainstream media and pornography tend to depict women often and easily achieving multiple orgasms, girls learn to expect that their bodies should automatically "know" about pleasure and how to readily achieve or display orgasm whether with a partner or alone. What is more, "instead of clitoral orgasm representing a marker of sexual liberation and empowerment, it was inscribed as a mandate that women must have to make their partners feel good" (Fahs 2011a, 279). In this way, women's pleasure has recently been "coopted in the name of demonstrating men's sexual expertise" (279). Girls are socialized to believe that something is innately wrong or unnatural about their bodies if it requires a lot of "work" to have an orgasm (if they are able to orgasm at all). Thus, girls who do not achieve orgasm easily or at all may feel marginalized. Because of this, many women now feel pressured to produce an "audible orgasm" or other evidence that their bodies' are sexually 'normal' (Jackson and Scott 2001, 107-108).

## Conclusion

The discourses that emerge in participants' retrospective narratives regarding their early (self-) pleasure socialization (or lack of) illustrate that a massive gender gulf continues to persist with regard to masturbation, challenging the popular perception that women have achieved sexual equality with men. This *masturbation pleasure gap* exists not only as a result of prohibitive masturbation-specific and general heteronormative discourses, but as a result of the deployment of a widespread cultural silence around female (self-) pleasure. Given that "prohibition, censorship, and denial" are some of the primary "forms through which power is exercised" (Foucault 1976, 10), it is not surprising that the absence of discussions and representations of female (self-) pleasure may have such a significant influence over how girls understand and make meaning of their solitary sexual experiences.

Due to the insidious nature of the discourses that are both *present* and *absent*, only a small minority of young women in this study were ever exposed to even a single positive message about female masturbation in their youth. As the following chapter will show, even girls who are exposed to some positive messages about female self-pleasure at an early age still often internalize many of the negative ideologies embedded in existing cultural discourses and silences. Because these discourses are so pervasive, they generally obscure any small disruptions in the negativity and silence around female masturbation to which girls may be exposed in their youth, neutralizing their normalizing potential. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, it is not until much later, if at all, that girls become exposed to information,

representations, or discourses that help them to challenge and overcome these early ingrained messages.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE CONSEQUENCES OF INTERNALIZING HEGEMONIC SEXUALITY DISCOURSES FOR YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL SELF-(DIS)PLEASURE

As the previous chapter documented, although a small minority of girls are socialized into positive attitudes toward solitary masturbation, most are socialized into cultural discourses, and silences, that identify female masturbation as sinful and deeply stigmatizing. At the same time, girls' understandings of female masturbation are also influenced by socialization into long-standing cultural discourses on heteronormativity. These more general sexuality discourses result in two competing and often contradictory assumptions about female masturbation – that it is a threat to heterosexual romance and sex (because of the challenge it poses to male sexual power) *and* that the ability to give oneself an orgasm is an important indicator of bodily “normalcy” and thus partnered sexual “success.”

Socialization into all of these discourses is reinforced by many social actors (parents, peers, religious leaders, the media, and so on), by a wide range of rewards and punishments. This chapter delineates the consequences that follow when young women adopt – or struggle with – various threads of cultural discourse. For purposes of clarity, each thread is discussed individually, although in practice these threads interweave with one another in women's lives.

In this chapter, I explore the many ways that masturbation is *not* pleasurable for young women. As I will show, dominant cultural discourses on masturbation frequently lead young women to police and punish their own solitary sexual pleasures. In turn, these practices often foster emotional struggles and pains while

reinscribing cultural discourses on female masturbation, female bodies, and female sexual pleasure.

### **Sexual Self-Surveillance**

Sexuality is a central locus at which relations of power intersect. By extension, when strategically deployed as a technology of power, discourses around sexuality can operate as a powerful instrument for the regulation of societies and individuals, possessing a “direct grip” on material bodies (Foucault 1976, 103, 140; Bordo 1993, 16). Because individuals rarely have the opportunity to compare their sexual behavior with others, individuals often must rely on the insights provided through depictions and dialogues from various sources as their guide to what constitutes the sexually “normal” (Tiefer 2004, 15). As a result of individuals’ vulnerability to the internalization of ideologies embedded in such cultural representations, prevalent discourses are gradually changing our “conception and experience of bodies” (Bordo 1993, 8, 39). Through this process, “representations homogenize” and “homogenized images normalize”; as the “self continually measures, judges, disciplines, and corrects itself” against these homogenized models (24-25).

Recent research on postfeminism and the sexualization of culture suggests that as a guide for girls’ self-management, popular representations may impose discourses that manage individuals – not through direct external surveillance, but through the *internalization* of regimes of disciplinary power. While “women are presented as active, desiring social subjects” within postfeminist media discourse, “they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance which has no



historical precedent” (Gill 2007, 163). Thus, supposedly sexually “empowered” girls can draw on and re-inscribe existing dominant discourses of female sexuality rather than challenging them (Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010, 127).

Even though it *appears* that women are no longer subject to the same external sexual regulation as in the past, power struggles over the definition of female sexuality are still at play today. Now, however, young women’s sexual subjectivities and bodies are primarily governed through an intensification of sexual *self*-surveillance, rather than through physical force or other more overt, overarching mechanisms.

Given its private and ‘invisible’ nature, masturbation is particularly difficult for parents, clergy, and others to monitor and regulate (despite their best efforts). As I will show, for many women, regardless of ethnicity, race, class, or sexuality, masturbation nonetheless can operate as a tool of social control. The internalization of dominant gender and sexuality discourses results in the self-policing and regulation of female masturbation, and young women’s experiences of sexuality, desire, and pleasure more generally.

### **Masturbation as Sin**

As discussed in Chapter 4, many American girls learn through their religious community to consider female masturbation sinful. Because “healthy” sexuality is confined in some of these communities as heterosexual penile-vaginal intercourse within marriage, young women often grow up believing that any type of non-marital, non-procreative sexual desire or pleasure is sinful. Girls are taught that the ideal (and sexually desirable) young woman is sexually innocent, pure, and

restrained. This is especially true for Catholics, Mormons (LDS), and Evangelical or non-denominational Christians, who are frequently reminded of the moral “dangers” of masturbation – as selfish, an addiction, and a gateway to other prohibited forms of sexuality (e.g. pre-marital sex, homosexuality, pornography) that can threaten marital relationships and family. These prohibitive sexual messages are frequently reinforced within the family, as parents and siblings implicitly discourage any kind of sexual exploration (knowledge or experience), as well as explicitly chastise or punish girls for engaging in genital self-touching.

More than one-third of the individuals I interviewed stated that their religious upbringing or current religious beliefs have deeply affected their attitudes toward masturbation.<sup>26</sup> Most of these respondents have engaged in masturbation, but because of internalized religious views that demonize female masturbation (and female sexual pleasure in general), their experiences are often marred by a sense of shame and sin. Thus, they may find themselves in a constant struggle between internalized messages that vilify female masturbation and their own longing to quench sexual desire through self-stimulation. Notably, the prevalence and extent of this self-regulation does not appear to vary significantly in terms of ethnicity, race, or class.

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<sup>26</sup> As noted in Chapter 3, while my sample consists of higher percentages of some particularly conservative religious populations in comparison with the national average (e.g. LDS, Muslim), the proportion of participants who identified as non-religiously affiliated (39.4%) is also significantly higher than the national average (15.0%) (Kosmin and Keysar 2009). As a result, the percentage of practicing Catholics (9.2%) or Baptists (1.8%) in the sample, for instance, is considerably less than the national averages (25.1% and 15.8% respectively).

## **Feeling Sinful, Fearing Judgment**

For those whose religions prohibit female masturbation, engaging in the behavior can result in deep feelings of sin. Ciara (30, white, heterosexual, Catholic), for example, comes from a strong Catholic background and continues to practice Catholicism. She recalls beginning to masturbate in her pre-teen years, but then forcing herself to stop because she knew that masturbation was “bad” and thought she was “going to burn.” Even though masturbation was never talked about, she remembers believing that “it was really dirty, because sex was for procreation.” Hence, when she masturbated in secret, she recalls feeling “very guilty.”

Even for those who have left their parents’ religion, and who now describe themselves as spiritual, atheist, or agnostic, their former religions still possess a strong hold over their feelings and experiences related to masturbation. For example, Monica (19, Latina, heterosexual, Pagan) says: “Growing up, since I was brought up Catholic, I was like, ‘Masturbation is bad!’ You know, ‘God is looking at me. I’m going to hell.’ ... I still have that paranoia of ‘God is watching me.’” Similarly, despite currently identifying as an atheist, Piper (21, Native American/white, lesbian, atheist) still associates orgasm with shame and guilt and considers self-pleasure to be immorally self-indulgent and selfish. Even though orgasm feels good physically, it is also accompanied by emotional conflict. Despite believing that she should not feel this way, Piper cannot help but feel that people are not supposed to let themselves be too happy. Because she was taught that “you should always be doing things for other people,” according to Piper, “If I’m pleasuring myself, it feels good, but it’s also kind of weird, so I prefer to pleasure other people ... There isn’t

any guilt involved in that because I'm doing it for them." Internalizing the traditional idea that any type of self-pleasure, sexual or otherwise, is contrary to the goals and values of a good Christian woman, Piper does not permit herself to enjoy the experience of masturbation. Instead her pleasure is largely Other-oriented, based on her capacity to give pleasure to partners.

### **Feeling "Out of Control"**

For many of the young women who internalized religious discourses about non-marital sexuality and masturbation as morally wrong (as well as double standards about female purity), giving in to their desire to masturbate made them feel as if they lacked control over their mind and body. Beyond concerns that masturbating is "wrong" or "bad," participants expressed concern about masturbation as a potentially addicting behavior. Perhaps reflecting deep-rooted Christian views which assume that women lack the moral restraint and willpower to control their sexuality (Coontz 2005), they often worried that their masturbation might be not only sinful but also abnormally frequent, thus also marking them as somehow mentally aberrant.

Annemarie's story illustrates these concerns. An active member of her religious community, Annemarie (27, white, "unlabeled" sexual identity, non-denominational Christian) works on staff at the non-denominational Christian church to which she belongs. In our interview, Annemarie recounted the numerous conflicts she has experienced, and continues to experience, with regard to negotiating her sexuality and her faith. Never having been educated about female masturbation growing up, masturbation "always felt shameful or confusing" to

Annemarie. She explains that masturbation was only discussed in terms of male behavior and usually in the context of “porn addictions.” Her church would talk about “life and purity in general, through the context of ‘What ways are you addicted? What ways are you not loving those around you?’” According to Annemarie, her father reprimanded her sister for masturbating as a child, “enough times that [I] knew that something was shameful about it or to be avoided.” Although she does masturbate sometimes, she describes doing so as “act[ing] out” and “an addiction.” For this reason, she tries to keep herself “fairly uneducated” about masturbation and is always “quick to turn the channel” or close a book or magazine to avoid masturbation “triggers.” Annemarie believes that if she can minimize her exposure to information or images that might produce sexual thoughts or desires or which might illustrate *how* to achieve self-pleasure, that she can lessen and eventually eradicate her urges to achieve sexual satisfaction through masturbation.

Unlike Annemarie, Heather (19, white, heterosexual), an observant Catholic and proud “virgin,” enjoys masturbation most of the time, despite the negative messages she received about masturbation through church and family. She argues, “It is hard to think that women were given the gift of multiple orgasms and we are not allowed to touch ourselves.” Despite this strong sense of entitlement to sexual self-pleasure, similarly to Annemarie, Heather has difficulty conceiving of masturbation as wholly pleasurable because of the challenge it poses to her religious ideals. Taught by the church that masturbation is sinful and that she should exercise self-restraint and “not act on [her] desires,” she believes in “procreation,

not recreation.” Heather recounts how giving in to her sexual urges through masturbation is sometimes *not* enjoyable because it makes her feel “weak” and out of control:

My sex drive was incredibly high this week. I am not exactly sure why it happened but I felt like I was going to go crazy if I did not relieve myself of that feeling ... I cannot even remember how many times I was in bed touching myself to calm down ... I am a bit concerned why I had such an intense drive for sexual intentions ... I am not sure if I wanted to touch myself and masturbate but I felt like I had to in order to feel better. The week made me feel really weak because I continued to give in to my sexual feelings. I don't want to be the person who just plays with themselves all the time. It scares me because [masturbation] has such a negative stigma ... Even though I reached orgasm multiple times during a single night, I don't think I fully enjoyed it. I was almost a slave to my own body. It is strange how my body can just dictate how I feel and what I do. I need to be in control and I don't know how it happened like this.

Rather than helping her to feel more connected to and “in control” of her body and sexuality, Heather’s experiences of self-pleasure often instead illuminate the extent to which she *lacks* this control.

The influence of internalized religious discourses on how Annemarie and Heather understand and experience masturbation is evident in these narratives. They do not adhere to the image of the ideal Christian woman as asexual and lacking sexual desire, or the expectation that women must maintain control over their sexuality and their bodies at all times. They also invoke a discourse of masturbation as scarily addicting. They fear that what they view as excessive desire and their subsequent lack of sexual restraint is indicative of a larger problem, that this bodily weakness may be indicative of moral weakness. These examples demonstrate the pervasiveness and power of such moralizing discourses to constrain young women’s experiences of self-pleasure. Once internalized, it appears to be quite difficult to

permit oneself to truly enjoy masturbation on a regular basis. As illustrated above, even Heather, who possesses a strong sense of entitlement to sexual self-pleasure and appreciates the orgasmic benefits of masturbation, feels compelled at times to police her own desire and feelings in such a way that denies her a fully embodied and pleasurable masturbation experience.

### **Refraining from Masturbation**

To reclaim control over their bodies and sexuality, some participants who consider masturbation sinful have tried to abstain from it. For example, Ciara (30, white, heterosexual, Catholic) told me, “Within a year after I had started [masturbating], I decided it was very guilty and I gave it up for Lent.” Since then, she has not often thought about masturbating, largely because she has a boyfriend, lives in a dorm (with no privacy), and is busy with schoolwork. Although, there have been a few exceptions in the past few years “out of the blue” when she gets “really horny.” “Quitting” masturbation allowed Ciara to dodge many of the messy, conflicting feelings she experienced when her sexual desires and her religious beliefs converged in the form of self-pleasure. Rather than confronting and challenging the internalized traditional notions responsible for these “bad” feelings, quelling her sexual urges with a partner felt more socially acceptable and less internally conflicting, and thus less of a violation of her religious values.

For many other religious participants, in contrast, fighting their “addiction” and abstaining from masturbation has been a continuous struggle. Generally, these women go through cycles where they repeatedly admonish themselves for engaging in masturbatory behavior, and make an active effort to curb their sexual urges.

While a feeling of triumph and strength may be felt when they (temporarily) succeed, participants report that this elation is often accompanied by a subsequent feeling of weakness or dismay when they inevitably give in to their desires.

Because of how it conflicts with her religious beliefs, Kayla (21, African-American, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) combats the urge to masturbate in a daily struggle. Raised Baptist, her family did not talk about masturbation as she was growing up. Nevertheless, Kayla was brought up with the understanding that “you’re not supposed to do it.” Now actively involved in a non-denominational Christian church, she says: “It’s a fight every day not to masturbate. I would like to everyday, before I go to bed, because it’s fun and helps me go to sleep, but you’re not supposed to, so I try not to. And then sometimes I mess up, and then I try not to again.” Kayla’s struggle to not masturbate is amplified because she knows masturbation is a potentially enjoyable and physiologically beneficial activity. An important distinction exists between what she *wants* to do and what she thinks she *should* do. She says, “It’s always a struggle between what I want to do and what the Bible says, and basically it always comes down to ‘well, yeah, I want to...but I want to follow God more.’” Because of this struggle between her desire and her religious commitment, Kayla makes the decision whether or not to masturbate daily. When she does “give in” and masturbate, it usually takes place after she prays but before she goes to sleep, because she would “feel weird doing that and then praying.” When she succeeds in *not* masturbating and wins this daily battle between her sexual desire and her dedication to follow the Bible, she feels, “strong, because I’m denying myself something that I want, but dissatisfied.” Thus, it is apparent that there is



really no “winning” for young women like Kayla. On the one hand, if she masturbates, she is subject to self-imposed emotional stress and dissatisfaction resulting from internalized religious ideologies and her perceived failure as a faithful Christian. On the other hand, if she does not masturbate, she must contend with her unquenched sexual desires and lack of physical satisfaction.

Curbing her sexual desires and trying not to masturbate is also a daily challenge for Shalene (19, white, heterosexual, LDS). As a child Shalene had been admonished by her mother for masturbating. As she grew older, she became more aware that masturbation is against Mormon precepts. She says, “[Masturbation’s] looked down upon in my church. I’m not supposed to be doing it.” However, especially during times of stress, Shalene found it impossible not to give in to temptation and masturbate. She has tried to stop masturbating numerous times over the years, but these attempts have all eventually failed. As a consequence, she explains, “It’s something that I’ve struggled with for so long. And there was a lot of guilt and a lot of shame surrounding it.”

Shalene has expressed a renewed interest in preventing herself from masturbating since she began dating a new, highly observant “good” Mormon several months earlier. “Ever since I have dated him,” she says, “ I have not [masturbated], because he is such a good guy and I want to be good for him. And engaging in that act would not be considered good or appropriate.” Proud of the sexual self-restraint she has exercised in recent months, Shalene tells me about a specific masturbation struggle she experienced, and overcame, the night before our interview:

I'm not at all proud of the things I've done or gone through, or the struggles I've had since childhood ... but I feel for now, I'm being more mature and being more controlled. Just last night I was really stressed and pulled an almost all-nighter. And I was really stressed and I was like, "You know what, I just need to get out some of the frustration." And I wanted to do what I normally would do. And I was like, "No, you're dating such a great guy. You haven't done this since dating him. Why would you ruin that now?" ... I literally laid down on my floor and said, "You're going to sit here and not do it." And it was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I was just so stressed. I was so overwhelmed. It was three in the morning and I had to get up at five ... and I was just, "You are going to lay here and not do it, and you are going to be able to control your thoughts. And you are going to think about doing it, but you are not going to do it, because you don't have to do everything that you think about." And I sat there and it was really hard ... I must've sat there for ten minutes. And then I sat up and was like, "You haven't done it. The moment of weakness has passed. Instead of succumbing to it, you fought through it, and now instead of doing something you shouldn't be doing for a half hour, you can go back to your homework and be productive." And so I woke up this morning and was like, "Wow, good job." The fact that I haven't done it in three months of dating my boyfriend, and the fact that I passed last night when it was really hard; it's just like I think I'm finally on the road to doing what I know I need to do.

This example not only demonstrates how agonizing and energy-intensive negotiating between a young woman's desires for independent sexual satisfaction and her deeply ingrained religious beliefs can be, but also the extent to which such young women might engage in sexual self-policing to feel in control of their body. Shalene sees it as her responsibility to monitor and regulate her sexual feelings and behaviors. Accordingly, she constantly subjects herself to what appears to be quite exhausting self-scrutiny and reprimand. Because she has deeply internalized the idea that sexual restraint is of the utmost importance, chastising herself for, and fighting against, her natural sexual urges is the only way she knows to demonstrate her commitment to her faith. The costs for young women like Shalene are quite

significant, and ironically, this results in her spending a large amount of time obsessing about masturbation.

### **Female Masturbation as (Secular) Stigma**

As discussed in Chapter 4, even when young women do not internalize the idea that masturbation is sinful, they may still adopt a more secular view that regards masturbation as deeply stigmatizing – as dirty, gross, and just generally bad. This view is reinforced through direct chastisement by parents or teachers for engaging in masturbatory activity, through cultural discourses that stigmatize female sexual knowledge and exploration in general, and by peers who label anyone who is believed to masturbate as “weird” or “gross.” In addition, the view that masturbation is profoundly stigmatizing is also reinforced by the *lack* of a discourse on female masturbation. This silence can lead girls from diverse ethnic, racial, class, and religious backgrounds to consider masturbation to be both abnormal and unspeakably wrong.

Leah (19, white, heterosexual, conservative Jewish), for example, does not feel guilty “in the same way that Christians would feel guilty about [masturbation], like the sin.” Instead, her guilt stems from feeling “a little bit dirty because people talk ... about it in a derogatory kind of way” and because “female masturbation is like, super taboo.” Brittany (21, white, heterosexual, atheist) similarly experiences emotional discomfort when masturbating even though she is not religious. She says, “I don’t know if it’s become engrained or just a part of my own being, but I can’t help but feel uncomfortable about it sometimes ... I’m not sure that it’s okay.” Especially for young women who were not raised in a conservative religious household, the

source of these feelings can be quite confusing. For example, Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) recalls thinking masturbation was “super wrong” and consequently told me that every time she masturbated, “I would feel so bad, like so guilty. And I didn’t know why at all ... I just felt bad about it.” Thus, it is apparent how the internalization of secular discourses (and silences) surrounding female sexuality and pleasure may also result in girls and young women experiencing significant masturbation-related struggles.

### **Hiding Masturbation, Fearing Discovery**

As a result of this deep-seated sense that masturbation is incredibly wrong, most women concluded (often at a very early age) that masturbation is the ultimate secret that must be kept private at all costs. For instance, even though Shreya (22, Indian, bisexual polyamorous, cultural Hindu/Muslim) believes that masturbation is “all right,” she explains, “There’s always still the niggling thought in your head that ‘this is wrong.’ So there’s always that ... thought ... ‘this should be hidden’.” Due to the internalization of such messages, many participants’ live their lives marked by fear of discovery. Leah (19, white, heterosexual, conservative Jewish), for example, conveys how “scared” she was to tell anyone about her masturbation, that masturbation was “one of the biggest secrets of [her] childhood because it was so taboo.” Similarly, Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish), recalls what it was like to live in fear of being “outed” as a masturbator:

As much as I have tried to get rid of it over the years, there’s still that stigma from middle school where I thought [masturbation] was the most shameful thing that I could do...I had this crazy fear ... “What if, while I wasn’t home, somebody came in with a video camera?” And so people could see or would

know. And then it was my deepest, darkest secret, and what if it was exposed?

Due to the overwhelming fear of the social repercussions of being “caught” and labeled as a masturbator by others, participants’ learned to hide their masturbation. For many participants, masturbating in situations where they lacked absolute visual or audio privacy continued to be stressful and not pleasurable. For Jess (19, white, heterosexual, Episcopalian), for example, masturbating during the school year never felt comfortable because she had a roommate. Masturbating in her dorm room was too “weird” because she had to constantly worry about “the possibility of her walking in.” Kelli (21, white, heterosexual, agnostic) expresses similar concerns about her roommate barging in and catching her masturbating, or at the very least hearing the sounds she makes when she orgasms. She explains, “It is also harder to relax when you have to share a space with somebody.” She felt much more at ease to “let go and masturbate” when her roommate was away on vacation because she knew that no one would potentially hear or interrupt her. Similar to the religious young women who fear that God is “watching” them masturbate, Yana, Jess, and Kelli also possess the concern that they might be externally monitored when they self-stimulate. As if living in Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon” – a “prison-machine” containing a “central point from which a permanent gaze may control prisoners and staff” – the possibility that they *could* be observed at any given moment is enough to compel these young women to account for their sexual thoughts and behaviors at all times (Foucault 1984, 217). It is out of the anxiety that this threat of constant sexual surveillance induces that many young women resort to exercising such extreme

vigilance as to when and where they pursue self-pleasure, in effect rendering any actual external policing unnecessary.

These examples demonstrate the pervasiveness of hegemonic sexuality discourses and the damaging effect their internalization can have on young women's lives. For most of these women, the mainstream societal stigma associated with female masturbation outweighed that of any other sexual, or non-sexual, behavior. They could conceive of nothing more horrifying or shameful than to be labeled as a "masturbator." The fear of being "caught" plainly outweighed the desire for sexual satisfaction, or at the very least, interfered with their ability to fully take pleasure in their masturbation experiences.

Strikingly, participants rarely mentioned that privacy concerns deterred them from engaging in or enjoying partnered (hetero)sex. Because female masturbation is perceived as a threat to traditional norms which dictate that women should only be sexual (let alone experience pleasure) in a (male) partnered context, women who experience solitary self-pleasure are demonized. Thus, even those women who understand masturbation to be a healthy and normal sexual activity possess a strong sense that female masturbation is something highly personal and private, something that no one else should ever know. As Lena (32, white, heterosexual, Catholic) writes, "Good girls do not do it and if they do, they definitely do not talk about it." Owing to the severity of this societal taboo, and the discomfort it fosters, even those who do enjoy masturbating often can only do so in what they perceive as a safe space, when they perceive masturbation to be least "risky" – conditions difficult to meet for those living at home or with roommates.

**Fearing Physical Damage.** Lacking scientific knowledge about female masturbation, some participants expressed concern that it could lead to physical damage. Internalizing the mainstream idea that female masturbation is taboo and “wrong,” some young women translated this “deviance” onto their genitalia. Hayley (23, white, heterosexual, no religion), for instance, recalls her extreme pleasure at discovering masturbation in a Jacuzzi at the age of ten. Despite enjoying her baths immensely, she remembers hating herself afterwards and thinking, “You shouldn’t be doing that. What if someone catches you?” She discusses how she came to connect this feeling with the appearance of her genitalia:

When I was about 12, I finally decided to get out a mirror and see what my vagina looked like. I remember looking in the mirror and being horrified! To me it appeared that the lips of my vagina were out of control! They were darker than the rest of my body and they looked disgusting. I immediately decided it was my fault that my vagina looked this bad. I imagined that my vulva looked this way because I had masturbated in the tub too often. At this point, I became obsessed with the idea that no one could/should ever see my vagina because they would also feel it looked disgusting!

Like Hayley, Mandy (22, white, heterosexual, Methodist) also discovered and took pleasure in masturbation at an early age, and believes that is why she has an excessively large clitoris. She always thought it meant something was “wrong” with her. Mandy reports that to this day she gets “nervous” when sexual partners perform oral sex on her because she assumes that it “looks gross” to them too. In this case, Hayley and Mandy appear to punish themselves not just for masturbating, but for *enjoying* masturbating. We can see how, for young women like Hayley and Mandy, the discursive silence (and stigma) around female masturbation leads them

to regret their masturbatory experiences, regard their genitals as damaged, and restrict their pleasure in both solitary and partnered sexual experiences.

### **Female Masturbation and Heteronormativity**

Until this point, this chapter has focused on the impact of masturbation-specific discourses on young women's feelings and experiences. Yet, these discourses do not stand on their own. Young women's experiences of masturbation are also affected by more general heteronormative sexuality discourses. Historically, female masturbation has been considered taboo primarily because the notion of women being sexual without a man poses a threat to the ideals of female purity and chastity. The thought of women pleasuring themselves also defies the traditional Christian ideal which situates procreative sex as the sole healthy context for sexuality. The very concept of female masturbation challenges the idea that men necessarily possess power and control over sex and pleasure. Hence, even today (as evidenced in Chapter 4), female pleasure tends to be considered most acceptable in the context of heterosexual romance, male pleasure, and the "gift" of pleasure to women by men.

The internalization of these traditional gender ideologies is reflected in young women's ideologies and experiences of masturbation in several ways, including denying oneself pleasure (by not masturbating, altering the way one masturbates, or making oneself feel "bad" for masturbating) to preserve these perceived ideals. First, while the overwhelming majority of participants do engage in (and enjoy) masturbation, they conceptualize masturbation as a lesser substitute for partnered sex. They generally prefer partnered sex, even when it is *less*



physically pleasurable than masturbation. Second, because they valorize penetrative pleasure above all, some participants police the stimulation method they employ to masturbate. Third, as a result of strong cultural messages that suggest that women should be solely aroused by heterosexual romance and emotional connection, many women engage in sexual self-regulation; they police the sexual scenarios which they imagine or view for masturbatory arousal and pleasure. Fourth, because of its perceived threat to future partner relationships and sex, some women abstain from masturbation entirely. Finally, a number of women contend with the idea that masturbation might be a threat to their current or future relationships by incorporating a partner into their masturbation experiences.

### **Masturbation as a (Lesser) Substitute for Partnered Sex**

Most participants viewed masturbation as a lesser substitute for partnered sex. Many heterosexual women perceived partnered sex as *always* preferable to and more pleasurable than solitary sex based on the belief that current or potential male partners would view female masturbation as a threat or insult to their sexual prowess. Regardless of sexual orientation, though, the majority of young women preferred for a partner to “give” or “help” them achieve their pleasure.

Many of the young women with whom I spoke consider masturbation as a poor replacement for partnered sex, even when partnered sex is *not* accompanied by orgasm. According to Karla (19, Mexican, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), “I still like having sex more than I like masturbating, even if they don’t make me come ... It still feels good even if I don’t get to orgasm.” Likewise, Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual) insists that she would never choose

masturbation over a partnered sexual interaction, even though she can give herself a more pleasurable orgasm. Similarly, Skyler (19, white, heterosexual, spiritual) expresses, "As fun as masturbating is, I would much rather be with a guy. Not even have sex with a guy, but I'd rather go a week without touching myself if I could make out with a guy for an hour." It appears that there are a number of non-orgasmic pleasures that these young women feel they gain from participating in a partnered sexual interaction, which they do not experience alone. Hence, they relegate masturbation to the position of a second-class sexual activity. Alex (29, white, lesbian, non-religious), for instance, likes to be "held" after sex. She labels masturbation as just "fine," because "it doesn't spoon you at night!" Additionally, some participants preferred partnered sex to masturbation because they enjoyed the sense of mutuality, of pleasuring another person. Deb (22, white, lesbian, reform Jewish) explains, "Even if I don't necessarily reach climax, I get a lot of pleasure out of pleasuring someone else." Due to the pervasiveness of cultural messages which dictate that partnered sex is the "end all, be all" of sexual activity, for a diversity of young women it appears that possessing the ability to provide oneself with orgasmic pleasure does not necessarily influence one's level of desire to engage in partnered sex.

Many of these young women considered masturbation as a last resort. For most, lack of access to a current or potential partner was the primary qualifying condition for engaging in masturbation. Some also cited during menstruation as another example when it might become necessary to "turn" to masturbation. Samira (22, Iraqi-American, heterosexual, Muslim), for example, who does enjoy

masturbating when her husband is away on business, believes “people are for people.” Accordingly, she feels that masturbation is only healthy when “necessary”: “If you’re a teenager and you can’t find someone. Or if you’re in a long-distance relationship and you don’t want to go and sleep with someone else ... you do it over the phone ... Or if you really just can’t find somebody.” Thus, despite taking pleasure in masturbating, young women like Samira nevertheless view sex with a (male) partner – that is Other-oriented – as the ideal.

For others, like Mandy (22, white, heterosexual, Methodist), lack of orgasm during partnered sex was another reason that might “necessitate” masturbating. High levels of resentment often accompanied masturbation in this case, because one must “resort” to masturbating to achieve orgasm. Mandy says:

I have only reached orgasm when I have masturbated which sometimes sucks. I want to be able to orgasm when I am having sex ... the guys I’ve been with have only spent a minimal amount of time on my clitoris ... Although I am capable of reaching orgasm myself, [that] doesn’t mean I would prefer it.

Because Mandy valorizes partnered sex above all, she experiences frustration when her male partner(s) do not provide her with “better” sexual satisfaction than she could achieve through self-stimulation.

Some women preferred partnered sex to masturbation simply because it felt more pleasurable for them or because they found the orgasm to be more intense. Some of these women felt resentment about the fact that they found masturbation to be such a poor substitute. They preferred to be able to give themselves the same pleasure that their partners do. Bianca (22, Hispanic, bisexual, non-practicing Catholic) expressed this frustration:

Sometimes I feel powerless because I feel trapped in my body. It is as if I cannot give myself the pleasure that I get from sexual intercourse. So if I'm not having sex with another person, then I feel unsatisfied or like I'm missing something in my life. However, I don't go looking for sex because I don't want to have casual sex.

In contrast to young women like Mandy who aspire for partnered sex to feel more pleasurable than solitary sex (and who experience disappointment when it is not), Bianca believes that she should be able to give herself the "best" pleasure.

The negative consequences of girls and young women being socialized to be primarily Other-oriented are reflected in many of these narratives. By demonstrating that they actively desire to possess the power to please themselves, however, some women, like Bianca, challenged the traditional notion that men should be at the center of female sexual experience and pleasure. Nevertheless, regardless of how pleasurable they find masturbation in comparison with partnered sex, the majority conceptualized masturbation as a lesser sexual activity.

### **Masturbating the "Right" Way**

Based on the dominant assumption that pleasure should be "given" to women by men, participants' largely believed that the penis should be central to the achievement of female sexual pleasure. For this reason, many participants felt anxious about whether their method of genital self-stimulation was "normal" if they did not use a phallus to masturbate. Unaware that the majority of women do *not* experience orgasm with internal vaginal stimulation alone, as has been demonstrated in previous research (Fahs and Frank 2014), most young women believed that they were in the minority for solely preferring external, clitoral stimulation during masturbation. This lack of knowledge is not surprising given that

magazines like *Cosmopolitan* frequently gloss over this important fact, and instead focus primarily on penetrative pleasure.

In some cases, not masturbating in the (perceived) “right” way could lead to a sense of dissatisfaction or shame associated with one’s masturbatory experiences. Cole (20, Asian/Hispanic, female-attracted, Buddhist/Christian), for example, significantly preferred “dry humping” over “fingering” during masturbation. Nonetheless, cultural pressures to achieve pleasure through penetration made Cole feel that masturbating in this way was not “right.” Cole explains, “I always feel I’m probably doing it wrong ... I always feel weird. I always feel like it’s not a legitimate way to masturbate, by preferring dry humping ... It feels like if there’s no penetration involved, [people] probably won’t count it.” Cole, who identifies as “gender-neutral” and is attracted to female-bodied individuals, internalized the idea that achieving pleasure through any method other than penetration, whether alone or with a partner, is “less than.” Even though Cole feels the most pleasure through “dry humping,” and has no interest in engaging in partnered sex with individuals who possess a penis, Cole is not able to fully enjoy masturbation utilizing this technique because dominant societal norms dictate that penetration is the “best” way for female-bodied individuals to achieve orgasm. Hayley (23, white, heterosexual, no religion) similarly worries that externally stimulating herself using a Jacuzzi tub jet or a vibrator is not the “right way to have an orgasm” because it does not involve phallic penetration.

Other participants initially tried penetrating themselves, despite it not feeling good, simply because they thought it was the “right” way to masturbate. For

Alexis (22, white, heterosexual, Christian), for instance, “inserting the vibrator ... actually hurt.” Masturbation did not become enjoyable for her until she used the vibrator externally on her clitoris. Marianna (20, Armenian/Filipino, heterosexual, Armenian Orthodox) also initially “tried going in and out” with a vibrator during masturbation. In the end, she concluded that it was “not so great,” and felt disappointed that she “never did have that orgasm.” Even when they know that they prefer clitoral stimulation, many young women still push themselves to try to achieve pleasure through penetration – because it is perceived as the “right” way.

Traditional discourses that valorize orgasm utilizing a phallus or phallic substitute have a concrete effect on young women’s experiences of masturbation. Not only does the internalization of these discourses inhibit some young women’s capacity to experience sexual pleasure during masturbation, but in some cases, actually results in physical pain. Even though no one is physically “watching” how they masturbate, societal perceptions regarding the “correct” way to achieve female pleasure greatly influence the direction in which many young women steer their masturbation experiences. As a result, masturbation can become a markedly less pleasurable and enjoyable experience.

### **Taking Pleasure in “Unfeminine” Sexual Scenarios**

Other young women policed what they think about or view for arousal before or during masturbation. Based on the dominant assumption that women are less innately “sexual” than men and that pornography is “dirty” and a “guy thing,” many participants felt anxious about the content of their sexual fantasies and their consumption of pornography. Strong societal messages which suggest that women

should solely be aroused by heterosexual romance and emotional connection made these young women feel abnormal for taking pleasure in sexual scenarios which challenge this traditional feminine image. As a consequence, while initially physiologically arousing and pleasurable, participants often found these masturbation experiences to later be unsatisfactory and even “regrettable” due to their own self-policing and disapproval.

**“Sick” Fantasies.** Some participants experienced severe internal conflict regarding the types of sexual fantasies that arouse them during masturbation. Labeling their thoughts as “bad” or even “sick,” these young women often resented that they could not better control their bodies’ physiological sexual response. For example, Ana (25, Latina, heterosexual, no religion) remembers having “really weird ... sadistic ... revenge” fantasies when she was younger, where she would think about “sterilizing ... or plucking the petals” of the “mean” flowers in *Alice in Wonderland*. Afterwards, she would castigate herself, “What the fuck was going on in your head? Seriously. You’re a crazy person.” Ana finds it difficult to navigate through the web of pleasure, fear, and control she feels because of such sexual fantasies. She says, “It’s funny, looking for pleasure, but also trying to negotiate with the fear that goes along with ... not being in control.” Nora (29, Arab-American, heterosexual, Christian) similarly reprimands herself for her inability to “get off” without thinking “bad” thoughts. She despises that her “best chance of achieving orgasm” during masturbation is to think of “fucked up shit.” For example, she often fantasizes about her ex-boyfriend cheating on her, getting in a car accident, or getting in trouble for something “really big.” Chiding herself, Nora ponders, “Why is

that the kind of shit that gets me going? I wonder if anyone can fantasize about 'normal' stuff and get off." Both Ana and Nora engage in this kind of mental self-disciplining because they have been socialized to believe that they are "deviant" for becoming aroused by fantasies that challenge traditional ideals of feminine sexuality.

The "rape fantasy" is another scenario that often caused severe internal conflict when experienced and enjoyed during masturbation. Lena (32, white, heterosexual, Catholic), for instance, considers it "odd" and "a little twisted" that she finds the "rape fantasy" so arousing. In her rape scenario, Lena fantasizes about a man breaking into her home during the night. She pretends to enjoy being raped with the hope that her assailant will opt not to kill her afterwards. In the end, Lena "did not want to have a sexual experience that resulted from getting aroused by a rape fantasy," and admonished herself, "This is sick." By castigating herself for experiencing arousal in response to these fantasies, Lena hopes to convince herself that she does not wholly enjoy such scenarios and thus that she is not sexually "deviant."

**Same-Sex Fantasies.** "Sick" or "violent" sexual scenarios were not the only kinds of fantasies that could cause internal conflict and warrant self-policing during masturbation. For religious heterosexual women, for example, taking pleasure in thinking about a lesbian sexual scenario could cause confusion and self-disciplining. A devoted Catholic committed to maintaining her abstinence until marriage, Heather (19, white, heterosexual) recalls a "regrettable" masturbation experience where she fantasized about two girls having sex:



I know I am definitely heterosexual but I could not help but think about two girls together while I grounded my clit into my hands ... I don't know what made me think about it but it happened. I am really confused at myself for thinking about that ... My masturbation experience was not great.

Because experiencing sexual arousal in response to a lesbian scenario challenges her belief system and self-image as a good Christian and woman, Heather refuses to allow masturbating while indulging in such a fantasy to be pleasurable. Such self-policing helps her to dismiss the possibility that she may not be entirely heterosexual. Hence, Heather is able to resolve any sexual identity-related cognitive dissonance and confusion she may experience, and regain a sense of a control over her mind and body.

Annemarie (27, white, “unlabeled” sexual identity, non-denominational Christian) similarly struggles as a result of her same-sex masturbatory fantasies. She fears how masturbation illuminates her perceived sexual transgressions. Not only is engaging in masturbation against “the rules” of her religious community, but masturbation is “worse” when she fantasizes about a woman because “it’s not the right outlet.” Thus, it is evident that Annemarie’s struggles with masturbation are inextricably intertwined with her struggle to define and come to terms with her sexual identity. While Annemarie aspires to be “free from addiction” as her church requires (discussed above), stopping herself from engaging in masturbation also is about staunching the sexual identity conflicts which masturbation brings to the surface. She hopes that if she can keep herself from masturbating that she might also be able to deny, or at the very least control, her same-sex sexual desires.

**Viewing Pornography.** Due to mainstream social stigmas against both female masturbation *and* pornography consumption, many young women policed what they watch while they masturbate. Participants often felt “guilty,” “dirty,” or “weird” during or after masturbation experiences where they viewed pornography. This discomfort appears to stem from the almost universal assumption that viewing pornography during masturbation is normal, commonplace, and even expected for men, but not for women. Indeed, most participants’ associated women who view (or act in) pornography with “dirtiness” and promiscuity. Isabella (26, Latina, heterosexual, Protestant), for instance, stopped watching pornography because she believes it is not “healthy” or “good” for her like it is for her boyfriend. Alexis (22, white, heterosexual, Christian) similarly feels “bad” and “gross” for watching pornography when she masturbates:

I decided to watch internet porn in order to get myself excited thinking about sex in order to pleasure myself, but I was only able to watch a little bit of the sex scene because I would find myself not being able to concentrate on pleasuring myself when I felt bad and a bit grossed out by what I was watching ... I feel like there is still a stigma that women should not watch porn and that it is weird if a woman were to watch porn. This is probably why I got the feeling of feeling ‘bad’ for watching the porn. Even though no one knew I was watching it I still felt this way.

Even though Alexis knows that no one is observing her masturbatory behavior, she feels compelled to monitor and discipline her own feelings to conform to dominant societal standards for female sexuality which require that she *not* enjoy consuming such sexual content. In the same way, because Karla (19, Mexican, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) believes that “most girls don’t watch porn,” she feels

“abnormal” for watching. In addition, Karla further feels like a “weirdo” because she enjoys viewing “gang bang porn.”

Internal conflict experienced in response to a pornography video’s misogynist content was a primary reason that viewing pornography often culminated in an unsatisfactory masturbation experience. Dakota (20, white, straight/bisexual, agnostic), for example, sometimes feels “really guilty and dirty” after she watches pornography. She complains about how difficult it is to avoid offensive videos:

I don't want to see a girl getting slapped in the face with a dick, I don't want to see a girl getting “cream pied,” I don't want to see a girl getting cum [sic] on her face and putting it in her mouth, and I don't want to see the guy jackhammering her like she’s a fuck doll either but at least one of those things is in most videos. I feel like there aren’t any porn videos out there that I want to see.

While Dakota desires to view pornography as part of her masturbatory experiences, she rejects many of the dominant components present in mainstream pornography intended to appeal to the heterosexual male gaze. Instead, she yearns for pornography that showcases sexual acts that respect and honor “real” women’s desires and pleasures.

Similarly, Ava (21, white, heterosexual, no religion) writes about a recent unsatisfactory masturbation experience that involved viewing pornography. “What’s weird was I wasn’t really satisfied after watching it. I didn't achieve an orgasm, possibly because I knew what I was watching was faked.” Consequently, despite there being a dearth of free, easily accessible more female-pleasure oriented videos available on the Internet, it appears that these young women continue to try

to watch pornography for masturbatory arousal because some aspect of the experience feels pleasurable to them. However, because it is difficult to find videos that lack so many male-pleasure-centric components, that feel more “authentic,” or that adhere to normative expectations for what young women should find attractive and arousing, they frequently participate in physically unsatisfactory and emotionally unpleasant masturbatory activity.

### **Permanently Abstaining from Masturbation**

Based on the dominant assumption that the “best” pleasure should be “given by” and achieved with a (male) partner in the context of a romantic relationship, a small proportion of participants completely abstained from masturbation. Their lack of “need” to masturbate largely related to their conception of sex as being solely Other-oriented. In other words, they internalized the assumption that women should only be sexual in the context of a partner (preferably their husband). Similar to those participants who do masturbate, but who view masturbation as a lesser substitute for partnered sex, these young women believe partnered sexual behavior is the “end all, be all” of sex. However, unlike the majority of participants in this study, these young women specifically indicated that they would not and could not find engaging in solitary sexual behavior enjoyable.

Participants who claim to have never masturbated (and have no intention of masturbating) possessed a strong sense that people are meant to desire and engage in sexual relations with other people, not alone. Connie (26, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for instance, conceives of masturbation as “an imitation of sexual intimacy that we’re meant for.” Some of these young women,

however, conceded that they do not view masturbation as necessarily “wrong.” Rather, they believe masturbation could be enjoyable and healthy for other women, but that it is not necessary because they have (or prefer to have) a partner who can “take care” of their sexual “needs.” In fact, some, like Myra (22, American Indian, heterosexual, no religion), felt more “in control” and “empowered” to “not feel the need to masturbate.”

A primary reason that these participants do not masturbate is because they fear “ruining” themselves for future partnered sexual interactions. They believe that experiencing arousal and learning about pleasure alone, before being with a partner, might impair their ability to experience arousal and pleasure with a partner. Ashley (21, white, heterosexual, LDS), for example, cautions herself against “arousing” internal sexual “emotions” out of fear of “jeopardizing” her “happiness and better things that are to come.” She also emphasizes the importance of “learning together what turns each other on.” That is to say, she feels that sex is much less of a “bonding experience” if one were to possess pre-conceived knowledge about what feels good, rather than discovering sources of pleasure together. These women perceive the ability to “instill that pleasure” in oneself as detrimental because it might reduce their sexual reliance on their partner or their partner’s capacity to “give” pleasure. Finally, rooted in historical anxieties about the addictive properties of female self-pleasure (Groneman 1994), some participants also feared that masturbating, especially using a vibrator, would “corrupt” their mind. By generating too much excitement and pleasure, they worried that using a vibrator would create a “false perception” and expectation of sexual pleasure. Because Molly (18, white,

heterosexual, Lutheran), for example, did not find her first intercourse experience to be enjoyable, she especially fears that the experience of independent masturbatory pleasure could result in future partnered sex feeling even more comparatively unsatisfactory.

Ultimately, these women strongly believe that the bodily knowledge they could potentially gain through masturbation might result in disappointing partnered sex experiences. Completely abstaining from masturbating protects them against the possibility and knowledge that the penis is not the ultimate pleasure-granter, that they might achieve (better) pleasure without it being “given” to them by a (male) partner. Instead, they believe that ignorance is bliss; they assume that by denying themselves access to this bodily knowledge, with nothing with which to compare it, partnered sex will always feel the most pleasurable. In this way, they are able to guarantee that they will not violate the normative societal expectation that women’s sexual experiences and pleasure should solely revolve around male desires and pleasures. They also ensure that they remain blind to bodily knowledge and experience that in many cases may actually improve and enhance their partnered sexual interactions (this will be discussed further in Chapter 7).

### **Incorporating Partnered Sex into Solitary Masturbation**

Many young women incorporate a partner or some aspects of partnered sex into their solitary masturbation experiences. By maintaining the sense that a partner is somehow a participant in one’s experience of self-pleasure, female masturbation no longer poses the same threat to partnered romance and pleasure. These young women do not feel as if they are violating the social norm that female

pleasure should be “given by” and experienced with a (male) partner. In this way, the distinction between “solitary” and partnered masturbatory experience, between private and partnered pleasure, can become quite blurred.

One way that participants (intentionally and unintentionally) “included” their partners or another person in their masturbation experiences was through fantasy. Whether thinking about an actual past experience with a current or former sexual partner or a fictional scenario with a past, current, or potential future partner, these young women generally found masturbation accompanied by such fantasies to be more pleasurable because they feel more “real.” For example, according to Monica (19, Latina, heterosexual, Pagan), “When I thought about what we had done and being with him, [masturbation] was more exciting and it provided such a better release.” Imagining that another person is physically touching them helps to make their sexual experience feel less solitary; someone else is there, “giving” them pleasure. According to Samira (22, Iraqi-American, heterosexual, Muslim), “Most of it is about imagining that ... certain things are being done to you in a sense. And then immediately after a minute or two, you start actually feeling that some of these things are being done to you.” Some participants, like Heather (19, white, heterosexual, Catholic), experienced such incredibly vivid scenarios that masturbation actually felt like “real” partnered sex.

I was thinking about my best male friend whoe [sic] has been texting me last night ... I do find him attractive and sometimes I think about him when I touch myself or when I dream. So during my experience this morning, I imagined him kissing me while he was on top of me. I wanted to pull the imaginary version of him closer to me so I grounded my hand into my clit and shook it harder until I reached orgasm. I repeated sequence again until another orgasm ... While I was on the verge of orgasm, I quietly spoke aloud

to my imaginary friend telling him to push harder and faster into me. I believe I said his name a couple of times also. After I was done, I laid in bed with my arms wrapped around my teddy bear. He is really big so I imagined I was hugging my friend ... I was in my bed just brushing my hands over my body and pretending that my own hands were a guy's hands. It has been a long time since a guy has actually touched me ... Then I imagined him sucking and licking my nipples while his hands moved over my body. He would pull me closer to him as he kissed me.

Because girls are socialized to believe that they should desire and take pleasure in playing a passive, receptive role in their (hetero)sexual interactions, masturbation in which it feels as if the pleasure is Other- rather than self-generated often is experienced as superior in this way.

For some, fantasizing served as a mechanism for not feeling “lonely” or “pathetic” during or after masturbation, especially in the wake of recent break up. For instance, Bianca (22, Hispanic, bisexual, non-practicing Catholic) says, “Yesterday I used my vibrator ... I try to fantasize so that it feels more real. Otherwise, I begin to feel sad that I don't have a partner, or being [sic] to think about former partners. This makes me sad because that person isn't in my life anymore.” Such feelings likely result from the fact that girls are exposed to romantic scripts at an early age (e.g. in Disney films) which dictate that women are not “complete” and cannot be happy without a (male) partner (Martin and Kazyak 2009). Thinking about a current or past romantic partner during masturbation helps to revive emotions and feelings associated with that relationship that might enhance one's sexual desire and pleasure. For Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish), for example, thinking about a past partner often helps her “get there” when she is not “incredibly in the mood.” For others, like Priscilla (27, Native American, bisexual,



Catholic), the positive emotions evoked by thinking about one's current partner during masturbation can alleviate the pain of "missing" them when they are not around. She says, "While [my girlfriend] was gone, I pleased myself using my hands and thinking of prior experiences ... Sometimes after I climax, I like to think about the future with my partner. One day I would like to have a wedding." Hence, it appears that another benefit of masturbation feeling more "real" for many girls and young women is that it conforms to traditional ideals of feminine sexuality which dictate that women be aroused by an emotional connection, and thus only experience desire and pleasure in the context of a romantic relationship.

In contrast, some participants resented their reliance on a current or former partner for their arousal or pleasure during masturbation. Celia (18, Hispanic, heterosexual, no religion), for example, tries to "get back at" her boyfriend after an argument by masturbating without fantasizing about him.

It was on Thursday last week ... when my boyfriend's jealousy got us angry at each other. I thought, "Hey! Sex is the best medicine, so I'm going to masturbate with my vibrator." ... To "get back at him" I said I wasn't going to masturbate to him and just focus on my own pleasure ... It felt great and all, but with my mentality not being there, I wasn't achieving anything. Finally I called it quits ... I felt lame for not being able to orgasm without him. At some point during my attempts I even said, "okay, well think of some guy who you think is hot and uhh imagine him going down on you!" I imagined a guy but before I made him do anything, I stopped myself since it felt so weird masturbating to a stranger.

Celia felt uncomfortable fantasizing about a stranger and masturbating out of the fear that it somehow would constitute cheating. Celia was not the only participant to indicate that masturbating to a person in a fantasy felt real enough to have implications in the outside world. Deb (22, white, lesbian, reform Jewish) also

believes that masturbating to the fantasy of someone other than her current partner would feel like “one more step” closer to cheating. For this reason, she only thinks about her girlfriend during masturbation when she is in a relationship. As a rule, Di (27, Chixan@/Mestizo/brown, queer, atheist) only fantasizes about people from whom sexual consent has been obtained in real life, regardless of relationship status, because otherwise masturbating feels “creepy” and it becomes difficult to get “turned on.”

Another way that some participants tried to “include” their partners as a part of their solitary masturbation process or experience, was to talk with them about masturbation. Casey (21, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for example, discusses the importance of being “open” about her masturbation in the context of a trusting, intimate relationship, so that her partner is not “left out”:

I think it’s just an awareness, especially when we’re on vacations and stuff like that. We’ll talk about [masturbation], so the other person isn’t completely left out of the experience ... I just don’t want to keep things hidden ... I don’t want to feel like if I masturbate it’s a secret, so then I just talk about it, and in turn he talks about it. I think it’s good to be open.

Others have difficulty being “open” enough to physically touch themselves during masturbation. They prefer to feel as if it is another person who is pleasuring them because it feels more “real.” Usually, in this case a young woman might instead utilize a vibrator or other object to stimulate herself. Jenny (22, white, pansexual, spiritual), for example, told me that she uses a vibrator because “for some reason I needed a middle man before I could be with myself.” Jenny also stated “If I think about being with a man, then it’s like nice, okay, he’s here and here is his dick. Even though it’s a vibrator, it’s helpful to make the fantasy more real.”

Based on these narratives, it is apparent how many young women accommodate their masturbation experiences in a heteronormative context. The internalization of traditional sexuality discourses is evident, as masturbation is more comfortable and enjoyable for a number of young women when a past, current, or future “real” partner is “included.” Thus, there continues to be something threatening about a woman experiencing sexual pleasure in a truly “solitary” manner, without a man’s (or partner’s) involvement. As a strategy for combating the societal taboo and stigmas associated with female masturbation, many young women regulate and discipline their own masturbatory behavior in order to feel “normal.” By placing a (usually male) partner at the center of their experience their masturbation becomes Other-oriented, conforming to traditional norms of female sexual desire and pleasure. Fantasizing about a real person during masturbation can still be considered a component of “self” pleasure activities, though this can be problematic when such activities are not enjoyable or pleasurable without their involvement.

### **Female Masturbation and the “Pleasure Imperative”**

Many young women’s experiences of masturbation are also affected by a seemingly contradictory female “pleasure imperative” embedded within some recent heteronormative discourses. In contrast to the other discourses discussed thus far, which discipline women for visibly expressing their sexuality, this sub-discourse valorizes the performance of female sexual pleasure by communicating to girls that they should be perpetually sexually willing and adept, and that they should be skilled at pleasing and being pleased by men. Girls learn to expect their bodies

should automatically “know” about pleasure and how to readily achieve or display orgasm (often multiple times). Like so, girls come to view the achievement of orgasm whether with a partner or alone as something that should be “easy.”

Thus, one major measuring stick by which participants evaluated the “normalcy” of their sexual bodies was their ability to “successfully” achieve orgasm from masturbation. In other words, women who did not regularly or ever experience orgasm during masturbation tended to be highly self-blaming and critical of their bodies’ seeming incapacity to conform to a modern pleasure imperative which demands that women display pleasure (through orgasm) readily. Even without the physical presence of a partner, these women experienced internal pressure to produce an orgasm.

### **Masturbating “Successfully”**

Jamie (21, white, heterosexual, spiritual) recalls how “embarrassed” she felt after trying to masturbate and not reaching orgasm, “I feel like everybody expects you to have had orgasms and it’s kind of like, ‘I don’t know if there’s something wrong with me. Maybe that’s why I’m not having them’.” Lacking knowledge on *how* to masturbate, like Jamie, few women with whom I spoke actually experienced orgasm during their first attempt(s) at masturbating. For this reason, they often looked inward and internalized the blame for this perceived “failure.”

Even after gaining more masturbation experience, achieving orgasm during masturbation was frequently not a straightforward or easy matter. While pleasurable, there was a certain stress and uncertainty associated with masturbation which rendered masturbation less satisfying for many participants.

Basically, they never knew whether or not their efforts would result in “success.” For example, Rhiannon (21, white, heterosexual, atheist) explains how she feels about masturbating regularly, even though it rarely results in orgasm: “I mean it still feels good. I’m going to keep doing it even though I don’t orgasm often, but ... it’s not as satisfying. It’s more of a win. I don’t know – it is pretty satisfying when I can actually get there.” Rhiannon continues to hold out for that “win,” for that elusive and rare orgasm, despite the time and struggle it may require for her to get there. It is clear that, like Rhiannon, many young women may be willing to subject themselves to a series of less pleasurable masturbation experiences, with the hope of an occasional great one. For Lupe (21, Hispanic, heterosexual, no religion), for instance, “it was such a relief” when she finally “masturbated successfully” after trying for a long time.

For some women part of the shame surrounding a lack of orgasmic “success” during masturbation related to a parallel struggle to achieve orgasm during partnered sex. Pressures felt to “come” with a partner sometimes traversed the divide between partnered and solitary sex, extending into the realm of masturbation. For example, recalling her struggles to orgasm during masturbation or partnered sex, Alex (29, white, lesbian, non-religious) stated, “Even when I masturbated I felt the pressure to orgasm. I felt there was something wrong with me that I hadn’t.” An individual’s perceived orgasmic “failure” during partnered sex was sometimes mapped onto solitary sexual experiences in this way, evoking many of the same pressures and negative emotions felt when orgasm is not “accomplished” in the presence of a partner. Consequently, despite the physical lack of an Other

during masturbation, based on self-imposed pressures, the inability to bring oneself to orgasm during attempts at self-pleasure was often seen as continued evidence of a young women's lack of sexual "success."

### **"Giving Up" on Masturbation**

**Permanently.** Because the sense of failure from being unable to immediately and easily know how to orgasm during masturbation was so great for some women, they "gave up" and permanently stopped trying to masturbate. In fact, while possessing strong religious beliefs was a primary cause for participants' to permanently stop or try to stop masturbating (as discussed above), the majority of participants' who permanently stopped masturbating were comfortable with the concept of masturbation on principle, but just did not find it pleasurable or feel "into it" when they masturbated. These young women generally had unrealistic expectations for masturbation. They were disappointed when it did not feel as instantly pleasurable or physiologically gratifying as they expected. Charlotte (18, white, heterosexual, atheist Catholic), for example, initially expected a "spontaneous orgasm." She subsequently loss interest in masturbating once she realized that "a couple of seconds isn't going to do it."

While many women stopped masturbating because it did not feel as "great" as they expected, others stopped because it felt physically unpleasant or even painful. Zahra (19, Iranian-American, asexual biromantic<sup>27</sup>, Muslim), for instance, attempted to masturbate when she was younger, but stopped because she "didn't

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<sup>27</sup> Someone who identifies as "asexual biromantic" lacks *sexual* attraction to any gender, but may be *romantically* or emotionally attracted to women and men (not necessarily at the same time).

really care for it” and because it felt “uncomfortable.” Similarly, masturbation “hurt” for Lauren (20, white, heterosexual, Orthodox Jewish) during previous experimentation efforts. Because she did not know anything about masturbation, she had no idea whether or not it was normal to experience some pain. She concludes, “I think I’m probably less than other girls as far as pleasure’s concerned ... I think there are people who might get more out of it.” Lacking access to accurate information about female genital physiology as well as knowledge of other girls’ experiences with self-(dis)pleasure, Lauren “gives up” on masturbation because she assumes that her body is innately resistant to sexual pleasure.

It is evident that one major barrier to these young women feeling like masturbation was “worth” engaging in was that most did not know *how* to masturbate. Many possessed only a vague idea of the concept of female masturbation before attempting it. Without specific knowledge about female genital anatomy, without ideas about where and how to best stimulate themselves (from parents, the classroom, the Internet, or representations in popular media), it is not surprising that masturbation often did not feel good or result in orgasm. Consequently, many participants “gave up” when masturbation continuously did not “work,” assuming that it was just something inherently wrong with their bodies.

**Situationally.** Out of this same fear and displeasure regarding potential masturbation “failure,” some participants (who generally found masturbation to be enjoyable) described *situational* factors that negatively affected individual masturbation experiences. A lack of time or energy was one reason why a given masturbation experience might be less pleasurable, potentially to the point of

wanting to or making oneself stop. Because of the knowledge based on previous experience that masturbation would likely not be enjoyable or result in orgasmic “failure” under those conditions, such factors were also often circumstantial deterrents from initiating masturbation.

Lacking adequate time or energy to masturbate “well” was a common explanation for why a participant might not enjoy, stop, or not masturbate any given time. For Jocelynn (22, white, lesbian, agnostic), for instance, masturbation does not “sound enticing” when she is busy with work and school because she just does not possess “the energy or will power to do it.” Because engaging in self-pleasure was often perceived and experienced as a form of sexual labor, other forms of “work” which resulted in exhaustion and feelings of stress rendered many women uninterested in making the effort to self-stimulate. Similarly, Heather (19, white, heterosexual, Catholic) believes that masturbating is “a waste of time and energy” when one is too tired or otherwise distracted to focus and enjoy it. Hence, a number of participants indicated that even if they initially feel “in the mood,” masturbating does not feel as good when they are tired.

While for some masturbation was a welcome relief and release at the end of an exhausting and stressful day, others found that any kind of mental distraction might prevent them from enjoying masturbation and reaching orgasm. Nikki (19, African-American, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for instance, often seeks out masturbation after a “bad day.” However, sometimes things “pop into [her] mind” from earlier in the day, and she thinks, “this is stupid” and stops. Being unable to clearly focus on masturbating was an important and influential factor on



many women's masturbation experiences. Alex (29, white, lesbian, non-religious) also often stops in the middle of masturbating when she is not "mentally engaged in any kind of sexual thought other than the act." Kara's (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) explanation for why she sometimes stops herself from masturbating illustrates some of the collective concerns that might motivate a given young woman to prevent herself from masturbating in a specific scenario:

There have been a few times where I could have, but I wouldn't let myself ... Sometimes I'll just feel the desire to, and I know that I physically want to, but mentally I'll just be like, "No, you'll just get distracted" ... or "That's stupid" or "Someone could come to your room." ... So, there are some times where ... I do want to, but I just stop myself for no reason. It's like I could. I just don't.

Because she conceives of masturbation as requiring significant emotional and physical effort, self-stimulating is not "worth it" for Kara unless she feels confident it will be "successful."

"Unsuccessful" masturbation is conceived as so frustrating to women who are accustomed to engaging in highly enjoyable masturbation that even the tiniest inkling that a potential masturbation experience might be remotely sub-par is enough to deter them from initiating it from the start. Based on negative emotional feelings and physiological dissatisfaction associated with prior masturbation experienced under less than ideal conditions (e.g. living with a roommate, after a stressful day), some young women appear to actively talk themselves out of masturbating, even when they desire to, because they feel it is in their best interests. Just as some young women opted to never masturbate to preemptively preserve their perception that partnered sex is the "best," opting to not masturbate in some situations may be one mechanism that other young women employ to protect

themselves from the feeling that they are failing to conform to a perceived female pleasure imperative – that they should always be interested in and “successful” at sex, whether partnered or alone.

It is apparent how dominant sexuality discourses which demand young women be sexually knowledgeable, available, and “successful” have pushed some to the point where they feel compelled to arm their bodies with the skills they perceive as required to succeed in the sexual marketplace. Lacking specific information on how to actually obtain that embodied knowledge, some young women force themselves to masturbate in ways that are emotionally or physically uncomfortable and non-pleasurable, to this end. While it is certainly positive that some young women perceive masturbatory “success” as an important pre-cursor to partnered sexual “success” and are turning to masturbation as a way to “practice” and develop their sexual skills (others might engage in sex with multiple partners to develop sexual experience but with different possible outcomes or consequences), it might be considered problematic when masturbation becomes a chore; something one engages in not in the pursuit of self-pleasure, but rather to prove the aptitude of one’s sexual body. When conceptualized as a sort of sexual test evaluated based on perceived male sexual interests and needs, masturbation can be viewed in terms of measurable outcomes (e.g. orgasm) and varying degrees of success (e.g. multiple orgasms, vaginal versus clitoral orgasm). In this way, masturbation can be co-opted as a tool of social control – a mechanism by which young women monitor and regulate their own sexual desires and behaviors to adhere and conform to hegemonic social norms.

## Conclusion

While masturbation is, physically, very safe, with no risk of pregnancy, disease, or violence, it is not without potentially negative consequences. Across ethnic, racial, and sexuality lines, mediating between the desire to masturbate and internalized negative masturbation ideologies appears to be a time-consuming, onerous, and even a potentially traumatic undertaking for young women. When masturbation is not easy, when it evokes contradictory and confusing physical sensations and emotions, young women often expend a great deal of energy on masturbation – whether they ultimately engage in it or not. Given the dominant religious and secular discourses which stigmatize female sexuality and pleasure, which demand that young women should appear sexually innocent and pure yet “know” how to give and receive pleasure in the context of sexual intercourse with a man, and the lack of a positive discourse around female self-pleasure specifically, it is not surprising that so many young women indicate that masturbation is a “struggle” for them. While for some this struggle involves coming to terms with whether how, how often, and how successfully one masturbates is “normal” in comparison with other women and what is considered to be within the realm of “healthy” sexual behavior, for others the struggle is to combat deeply ingrained negative ideologies about masturbation – to either come to terms with masturbating or to come to terms with *not* masturbating.

In my previous research with Breanne Fahs (Fahs and Frank 2014), we argued that the cultural silence around female masturbation allowed some adult women to engage in masturbation unfettered, as there was no “norm” to which they

might compare their behavior. The research presented in this chapter, however, suggests that this is largely not the case for girls and young women. Instead, this silence leads most young women to assume that whatever permutation(s) of masturbation they engage in must fall outside the boundaries of normative female sexual behavior. Without a specific script for engaging in female self-pleasure, young women turn to more general dominant scripts regarding female sexuality and pleasure to make meaning of their masturbatory feelings and experiences. These dominant discourses generally tell young women that they should be pure, chaste, and “in control” of their sexuality, and simultaneously that they should be perpetually willing to engage in and be “good” at sex (with men). Drawing on these competing discourses, it is not surprising that the majority of young women not only question and monitor the “normalcy” of some aspect of their masturbatory experience – whether it be their frequency, method, or level of orgasmic “success” – but that they reprimand themselves for transgressing these perceived norms as well. These findings complicate the prevailing feminist assumption that female masturbation is necessarily liberating or challenging to dominant social norms, because as these narratives demonstrate, there are a multitude of female masturbation scenarios in which traditional patriarchal sexuality discourses are actually reproduced.

In the absence of reliable information on female masturbation, girls and young women draw on available discourses to make meaning of their own feelings and experiences. Because almost all hear only negative discourses about female masturbation (if any), they assume that no positive discourses exist. Furthermore,

because female masturbation (and entitlement to sexual pleasure more generally) is largely *not* talked about or represented (especially in comparison with male masturbation or heterosexual sex), girls and young women often interpret this silence to mean that the desirous and pleasure-seeking female body is dirty and shameful. Lacking access to alternative positive representations of female masturbation or pleasure (which might help them to challenge this idea), the notion that female masturbation is universally “bad” or “wrong” can become internalized.

Both the *presence* and *absence* of particular discourses serve to delineate the boundaries between normative and non-normative female sexuality, operating in a disciplinary capacity to shape how girls and young women understand, and consequently regulate, their individual masturbation-related feelings and behaviors. This is particularly true in conservative Christian communities. In these communities, both the *presence* of explicitly prohibitive messages about (male) masturbation and a *silence* around female masturbation (and pleasure in general) results in young women deeply internalizing the idea that female masturbation is not only rare and abnormal, but also a significantly “worse” transgression than male masturbation. As a consequence of this double standard, it is not surprising that the participants who appeared to experience the most masturbation-related internal conflict and turmoil, and who continuously (and quite painfully) struggled *to* masturbate or *to stop* masturbating currently identify or were raised in a conservative Christian religion. Without access to alternative positive female sexuality discourses, young women within these communities find it difficult to move past their masturbation (and other sexuality) struggles. Denied access to even

a normative discourse for female sexual transgression – the sense of solidarity, resources for “coping,” and opportunity to “overcome” their struggles that men are granted – any young woman within such a community who feels sexual desire or the compulsion to satisfy such desires is essentially left stranded to face the resulting emotional and physical conflict on her own. Fear of the potential external consequences for violating dominant sexuality norms are so severe that many young women (often excruciatingly) police their own masturbatory feelings and behaviors, thus making external surveillance or punishment unnecessary.

The material consequences of such self-surveillance are serious. Many women extensively police their thoughts and emotions regarding masturbation, as well as their physical bodies. For example, as a result of internalized negative messages about masturbation as “dirty” or sinful, as well as a highly taboo and stigmatized behavior, participants frequently engaged in self-chastisement before, during, and after masturbation, often resulting in severe emotional pain and conflict. Participants also often worried about the potential for being “outed” as a masturbator and thus as deviant, abnormal, gross, pathetic, or even a “slut.” Feeling as if they lacked control over their body and sexual desires by “giving in” to their urges and masturbating, some participants tried to discipline their bodies by imposing masturbation “limits” on themselves. Instead of feeling more empowered and “in control” of their sexual bodies, attempts to restrict one’s masturbatory behavior often resulted in the opposite – a sense of dissatisfaction and resentment regarding one’s seeming incapacity to exert sexual restraint and deny the body what it “wants.” Indeed, masturbation appears to be a sort of double-edged sword with

regard to a sense of embodiment or feeling of bodily “control.” While some individuals view masturbation as an avenue for gaining a sense of control over their body and sexuality (as will be discussed in Chapter 7), for others, masturbation illuminates their *lack* of control over their own body and sexuality.

Given that young women have little choice but to draw on existing discourses on female sexuality and pleasure, which can be characterized as largely heteronormative, it should not be surprising that women who do not identify as heterosexual or who are not attracted to male-bodied individuals are also subject to the disciplinary power of these discourses. While previous research suggests that lesbian women tend to experience more frequent orgasms and higher levels of sexual satisfaction during partnered sex and masturbation in comparison with heterosexual women (Bressler and Lavender 1986; Coleman, Hoon, and Hoon 1983; Iasenza 2002; Schreurs and Buunk 1996), the narratives presented in this chapter demonstrate that women of a diversity of sexual orientations experience many of the same conflicts and pains related to masturbation stemming from the internalization of heteronormative ideals about gender and sexuality. This includes the pressure and struggle to readily accomplish orgasm alone and with a partner or to achieve pleasure in the “right” way through penetration, or the preference to be “given” pleasure by a partner. In fact, for many women who do not identify as heterosexual, masturbation-related emotional and physical struggles may actually compound with struggle(s) to come to terms with other aspects of one’s sexual identity. Women who identify as heterosexual may not necessarily experience these same struggles because they are not in violation of the norm of heterosexuality. This

may mean that those struggling with their sexual identity may experience even more internal turmoil and stress when it comes to masturbation.

By demonstrating how a private, 'invisible' behavior like masturbation can become a site for the policing and internal disciplining of female sexuality, this research highlights the power of increasingly covert mechanisms to govern gendered bodies and subjectivities through sexual self-surveillance. Contributing to existing feminist research on dieting (Brumburg 1997), anorexia (Bordo 1993), and the sexualization of culture (Gill 2007), which suggests that young female sexual bodies have increasingly become a site of social control and struggle, this research demonstrates how both the *existence* and *absence* of particular masturbation discourses have a material effect on how girls and young women understand, experience, and police their sexual minds and bodies. These findings illuminate the importance of more closely considering how the popular *appearance* that young women have become more sexually "empowered" and "liberated" in recent years actually obscures the increasingly hidden mechanisms through which female sexuality continues to be monitored and regulated. The "postfeminist" female empowerment rhetoric which currently dominates in mainstream discourses masks how gender and sexual inequality continues to be perpetuated in our society through an intensification of sexual self-surveillance for girls and young women (Gill 2007). Based on this research, it appears that access to such "liberating" discourses largely has *not* helped girls and young women to feel more in control of their sexual bodies or entitled to the pursuit of self-pleasure. Rather than signifying gender role reform or a move towards gender egalitarianism, this perceived shift in norms for



young female sexuality only serves to facilitate the continued invisibility of male (hetero)sexual power and privilege. Maintaining this invisibility helps to ensure that hegemonic sexuality discourses remain largely unexamined and unchallenged. A masturbation (and general pleasure) double standard continues to be perpetuated as a result, ensuring that girls and young women continue to be denied access to important embodied sexual knowledge.

These findings underscore the need to think more critically about how similar discursive mechanisms may be employed in conjunction with external mechanisms to regulate other more 'visible' private and morally "suspect" non-reproductive sexual practices that affect women's rights to make autonomous decisions about their bodies, such as birth control, abortion, homosexuality, prostitution, and pornography. As it is the *lack* of alternative sexuality discourses that makes this kind of regulation possible, the importance of making positive discourses about female sexuality, pleasure, and the body available to girls and young women through a variety of mediums is readily apparent. As I will discuss in the following chapters, providing opportunities for girls and young women to hear and talk about the term "masturbation" in the context of female desire and behavior helps to deconstruct the idea that this term solely applies to men's experiences. Even seemingly negative depictions or associations can have positive value as steps towards disrupting the silence and challenging dominant heterosexist discourses. As I will show, access to *any* discourse on female masturbation (even a highly prohibitive one) may provide individuals with the raw materials needed to challenge dominant discourses and interpret their experiences on their own terms.

## CHAPTER 6

### CHALLENGING AND OVERCOMING INTERNALIZED MASTURBATION

#### IDEOLOGIES

Chapters 4 and 5 examined early messages girls receive about female pleasure and the consequences of the internalization of these (largely negative) discourses and silences. In this chapter I explore various ways that young women struggle to challenge and overcome the internalization of these (negative) discourses. I consider the potential of the Internet, college, and “knowledgeable” peers to expose young women to alternative discourses about female sexuality and pleasure which may help to normalize female masturbation as a topic of discussion and an individual sexual behavior. While a small minority of participants indicated in their interviews or journals that they sought out or otherwise obtained positive knowledge about female masturbation as a child or early adolescent, the majority expressed that they did not gain access to these kinds of alternative sexuality discourses, if at all, until late adolescence or college.

Furthermore, I explore how for many young women, gaining the intellectual *knowledge* that masturbation is a normative and healthy behavior is just the first step in their struggle *to* masturbate. Developing the sense of emotional comfort and confidence to masturbate, and to experience masturbation as physically pleasurable, can be difficult. Finally, beyond feeling empowered to take active steps to claim one’s right to self-pleasure, feeling deserving of the *embodied* experience of self-pleasure and possessing the comfort to wholly enjoy the experience is often an even more significant challenge.

## Defining Sexual Agency

Defining what it means to possess or exercise sexual agency is challenging. Agency can be conceptualized both as the *capacity* “to determine and act” and the *exercise* “of will and conscious action” (Albanesi 2010, 10; Messer-Davidow 1995, 25; White and Wyn 1998, 318). Empowerment is a term often used closely with agency. Like agency, empowerment includes an awareness of one’s *potential for action* and *taking action*. In terms of sexual empowerment specifically, *intellectual* empowerment may refer to the knowledge, expectations, and intentions that an individual brings to a sexual encounter; whereas *experiential* empowerment may refer to actual sexual practice (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1992). Possession and enactment of sexual agency can be understood as a specific form of empowerment that is about desiring to and taking control of one’s sexuality. In this context, sexual agency can also be understood as a relational, contextual, and historically located process that an individual may attempt to accomplish or achieve (Overlien 2003; White and Wyn 1998).

As “the pleasure we get from our bodies and the experience of living in a body,” embodiment is a significant component of sexual agency for girls and young women (Martin 1996, 11). While “feeling like one can do and act” is also important, a sense of sexual subjectivity – experiencing oneself as a sexual being, feeling a sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure and safety, making active sexual choices, and acknowledging, experiencing, and acting upon sexual desire – is also a crucial factor for girls’ sexual development and health (Martin 1996; Tolman 2002). Thus, sexual

agency also includes a young woman's capacity to feel entitled to and experience embodied desire and pleasure.

Given these points, in the context of female masturbation, sexual agency can be understood as something which can be experienced and enacted on multiple levels: possessing the intellectual knowledge and desire to masturbate, taking active steps to masturbate, and finally, possessing the capacity to experience masturbation in an embodied, wholly pleasurable way. Thus, in this chapter I examine how in striving to gain access and lay claim to their sexual rights, young women struggle to possess and enact these various aspects of sexual agency through masturbation.

### **Gaining Intellectual Masturbation Knowledge**

As discussed in Chapter 4, only a minority of participants obtained reliable, positive knowledge about female pleasure, and masturbation in particular, as a part of their early socialization. With that said, for many, access and exposure to this kind of information increased (at least minimally) with age. It was in late high school or college, as they began to gain more independence and expand their social networks, when many girls first heard or talked about female masturbation in a positive light. Thus, in this section I examine (late) normalizing influences for young women's understanding of female masturbation, including unsupervised Internet access, attending college, and having "knowledgeable" peers. I consider how these influences helped to normalize masturbation as a topic of discussion and an individual sexual activity.

## The Internet

It was only in late high school or college, after they had become (minimally) exposed to the concept or term “masturbation,” and when many participants had unrestricted, unsupervised access to the Internet, that many young women felt motivated and comfortable to seek out masturbation knowledge for the first time.

**“Googling.”** For those young women who took the initiative to seek out knowledge about pleasure on their own (and who possessed unmonitored access to a computer or mobile device), the Internet was a significant source of information on female masturbation. Participants frequently “googled” the term “masturbation” when they had logistical questions or wanted to know if it was “normal” for women. Because participants were rarely ever told what masturbation is or how it works, especially for female bodies, often this curiosity arose after hearing the term briefly mentioned by peers in humorous conversations or in the media. Sometimes this Internet exploration led young women to reliable websites, such as a non-profit or educational page (e.g. Planned Parenthood or Sex, Etc.). Viewing sexual education videos online taught Dani (18, black/white, heterosexual, Catholic), for example, that masturbation “was completely natural and normal and almost everyone does [it].” In many cases, however, participants gleaned information about masturbation through blogs and other more informal web forums like *Reddit.com* or *4chan.org*. While not scientific in nature, these sites tended to provide more information about *how* to masturbate, and provided participants with the opportunity to read about real people’s masturbation perspectives and experiences. Cole (20, Asian/Hispanic, female-attracted, Buddhist/Christian), for example, who previously felt abnormal

for not preferring penetration during masturbation, no longer felt “weird” about masturbating clitorally after reading about other female-bodied individuals’ masturbation narratives online. Learning that “other people [masturbate] too and they do it in the same ways,” helped Cole to realize that it is normal to masturbate utilizing a variety of methods.

**Pornography.** Internet pornography was also a common source by which young women obtained knowledge about female pleasure and masturbation. Given that girls are rarely, if ever, provided with comprehensive visual representations of external female genitalia in school or through popular media, pornography served as an important source of graphic visual anatomical and physiological information not provided elsewhere. Lacking “tangible resources to look at and learn from,” according to Jenny (22, white, pansexual, spiritual), “porn was the easiest form of education.” Similarly, Ana (25, Latina, heterosexual, no religion) conceptualized viewing pornography as a form of “research,” and a mechanism for learning how bodies “work” without experiencing sex herself. In this vein, Shalene (19, white, heterosexual, LDS) found pornography fascinating, not only because it incited sexual feelings, but because seeing naked bodies “in action” was “completely different” than from reading about sex and because she “had never seen anything like it before.” For some women, pornography was also an important source of information about the physiology of orgasm. For Jenny, who ejaculates fluid during orgasm, viewing “squirting porn” helped her to realize, “pew, I’m not the only one that does this.” Pornography also served as a sort of visual guide for *how* to masturbate for many women – physically demonstrating how to stimulate the

clitoris with one's fingers or a vibrator, for example. According to Karen (21, Asian, heterosexual, Christian), "I can honestly say that if I had not watched porn ... I would not be as in touch with my own body and I would not be as aware of where I need to touch myself to get myself off." Hence, Internet pornography appears to provide young women with important knowledge about female sexual bodies and pleasure not available through other sources which helps to demystify the physiology and mechanics of sex, and thus increases their possibilities for self-pleasure and allows them to feel more "normal" about their bodies.

Finally, physiological arousal experienced while viewing Internet pornography (e.g. vaginal wetness) helped some young women to develop a more embodied understanding of their sexuality, including who and what they find desirable or pleasurable. Some women, like Kayla (21, African-American, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), only began masturbating initially in response to the physiological sensations produced from viewing pornography. She says, "I was watching porn, it felt funny down there, and so I touched it and it felt better." Additionally, for a number of participants watching pornography served as a sort of mechanism for "gauging" or "testing" sexual interest and attraction. For Camille (27, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for instance, viewing pornography provided her with an "idea" of what engaging in sex with another woman would feel like, empowering her with the confidence and motivation to later engage in a sexual relationship with a female partner. Similarly, Piper (21, Native American/white, lesbian, atheist) felt that viewing "over-the-top lesbian sex" online and subsequently feeling "turned on," helped her to start thinking more about how she would feel

about identifying as a lesbian “pre-coming out.” Even Kylie (21, white, female-attracted, non-denominational Christian), who possesses strong anti-pornography religious beliefs, told me that she felt that she had to watch pornography online because, “how else do I have access to figuring out what attracts me and what doesn’t attract me?” In this way, viewing Internet pornography provided some young women with the opportunity to learn about what it means to *feel* sexual attraction on an embodied level without engaging in sexual activity with another person.

As has been discussed in previous research (Boynton 1999; Eck 2003; Shaw 1999), young women acquire and internalize *negative* ideas about female bodies, sexuality, and pleasure through pornography as well. Participants in the present study also obtained inaccurate bodily knowledge, experienced feelings of bodily inadequacy, and possessed unrealistic expectations for masturbation (e.g. “easy” vaginal or multiple orgasms), due to non-realistic depictions of female pleasure and orgasm in pornography. Frequently the same image that helped to normalize pleasure for one woman contributed to its pathologization for another. For example, as discussed above, while “squirting” pornography demonstrated to Jenny that other women ejaculate fluid during orgasm, it led Lena (32, white, heterosexual, Catholic) to assume that she has never experienced an orgasm precisely because she has never visibly ejaculated. Ultimately, while there are undoubtedly a number of negative consequences of viewing mainstream Internet pornography, given the lack of alternative sources currently available to girls and young women for this kind of



information, it is also important to recognize its potential to provide valuable female sexual *intellectual* and *body* knowledge.

## **College**

While a minority of participants took the initiative to seek out information on female pleasure in middle school or high school (through the Internet, magazines, and so on), the overwhelming majority of participants did not learn, or feel comfortable learning or talking, about masturbation until attending college, if ever. The comparatively liberal educational and social college environment provided most young women with an unprecedented opportunity to acquire factual, intellectual knowledge about female pleasure and masturbation. The alternative discourses and experiences provided to young female college students through formal courses and on-campus events and activities, as well as informal peer social interactions, helped many young women to begin to deconstruct and challenge internalized ideologies.

**Academic Courses.** A large proportion of participants learned factual information about female genital anatomy and pleasure for the *first* time in the context of a college course.<sup>28</sup> Students were exposed to representations of and information on the physiology of female sexuality in physical science courses such as biology, anatomy, and health, as well social, emotional, and developmental factors in various social sciences courses, such as psychology, sociology, and women's

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<sup>28</sup> This finding is consistent with the fact that all of my participants were upwardly mobile college students. However, it also suggests that there may be a classed dimension to how and when girls acquire reliable knowledge about their bodies and sexuality. For instance, it is possible that young women who do *not* attend college may not gain access to potentially normalizing alternative discourses about female sexuality through other sources until later in life, if at all.

studies. Exactly what students learned about female pleasure, and masturbation in particular, varied from class to class. At a minimum, however, most developed an understanding of female genital anatomy, the physiology of sexual arousal and pleasure, and most importantly, that masturbation is a normal, healthy, and common behavior for men *and* women.

Learning factual knowledge from a reliable source in this way helped participants to develop a positive understanding of female masturbation not only on an intellectual level, but also in relation to their own desires and behaviors. After discussing masturbation in class, participants frequently experienced an “aha!” moment, where they realized that they are not “alone” and that they are “normal.” Mandy (22, white, heterosexual, Methodist), for instance, felt a huge “sense of relief” after learning about female masturbation in a college sexuality course. The class “made it so much easier to accept masturbation is something that is completely normal and natural.” In the end, Mandy felt “liberated” to know that it is “okay” to masturbate.

Such courses provided students with a legitimate, safe space to gain this previously “scary” and “forbidden” knowledge, to begin deconstructing their pre-conceived notions and cultural ideologies. Carrie (20, white, heterosexual, Evangelical Christian) recalls learning about masturbation as a form of sex therapy for couples in an abnormal psychology class, and thinking “Whoa, this wasn’t talked about. But this is talked about!” Similarly, Lauren, (20, white, heterosexual), who identifies as an observant Orthodox Jew, felt “much better” about masturbation after learning in a college course that female masturbation is not prohibited within

Judaism. Because masturbation was always explicitly discussed as forbidden for men, and never specifically addressed for women, the acceptability of female masturbation was previously unclear to her. Even though she believed this silence to mean that female masturbation was *not* prohibited, she nevertheless felt a sense of discomfort regarding masturbation. For this reason, Lauren took great solace in learning that the pursuit of sexual pleasure is not discouraged as long as no reproductive “seed” is spilled or wasted (Van Driel 2012, 152), and rejoiced, “I am religious too. I follow the Jewish law.” Hence, for young women like Carrie and Lauren, it appears that college courses provide a neutral, safe space to acquire new information about potentially taboo topics like masturbation without posing a threat to their religious identity.

Learning about female pleasure and masturbation in class could also spark a student's desire and motivation to seek out further knowledge on the topic. Hope (20, white, heterosexual, LDS), for instance, relished the opportunity to learn about topics that she had never previously been exposed to and expand her sexual knowledge. While learning that masturbation is a common practice was “shocking” at the time, she later reflects, “I kind of like when information comes up that’s against my beliefs because then it makes me look into things more.” Zahra (19, Iranian, asexual biromantic), an observant Muslim, similarly remembers “having a vague curiosity about [masturbation] and not really caring, then learning what it meant and then looking it up.” On account of learning about female genital anatomy in class, Zahra was inspired to search for information online that helped her to

understand that masturbation could be considered “okay” according to Islamic law in some contexts.

**Research Participation.** Academic-oriented opportunities beyond the classroom, such as participation in this research, also offered young women a safe space with which to discuss and learn about female pleasure and masturbation. In fact, this interview with me was the first time a number of participants had *ever* actively and openly talked about masturbation. While some participants expressed in post-interview written reflections that they experienced some initial discomfort, all of these women ultimately found the experience to be positive (see Appendix A for further discussion). Some even embraced the opportunity to actively face their masturbation discomfort and challenge internalized negative masturbation ideologies head-on in the interview. Kylie (21, white, female-attracted, non-denominational Christian), for instance, initially expressed discomfort with the term “masturbation” in our interview and asked if she could use a different term instead. A short time after, however, she told me, “I’m going to keep using the word ‘masturbation’ because I think the more one uses it, the less horrible it sounds.” Emboldened, later in the interview Kylie took the initiative to whisper the word “clitoris” aloud for the very first time. After I reassured her that she pronounced it correctly, she praised herself by saying, “Good job me!” Never before provided with a forum for discussing such topics, Kylie felt an immense sense of relief and pride after conversing about them with me. She also felt that participating in the interview had a large normalizing effect: “Even just saying and hearing certain words has

made me feel like they are a little less taboo. Like I'm not abnormal for feeling the way I do or experiencing what I have!"

**On-Campus Events and Activities.** Various structured and un-structured, academic and non-academic, on-campus events and activities also provided students with the opportunity to obtain knowledge about female pleasure and to develop a comfort with female masturbation as a topic of conversation and an individual sexual behavior. Because female pleasure was not something discussed at home or school when she was younger, the number of sex- and pleasure-positive activities available in the university environment pleasantly surprised Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist). One-time participation in residence hall sexual health workshops or other sexuality-related talks, as well as regular participation in feminist or sexual health-related student organizations, significantly contributed to normalizing female masturbation for students. Camille (27, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for example, remembers that attending one of these events in her dorm was the first time she frankly talked about sexuality and pleasure with female peers. As a result of participation in such on-campus activities, Casey (21, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for instance, feels that she has "a much broader understanding of ... masturbation. [That it] has a lot of different forms and meanings and instances for different people." Thus, it appears that it is not until they attend college that many young women like Shanna, Camille, and Casey are provided with access to safe spaces for discussing sexuality and (self-) pleasure with others.

**“Campus” Sex Store.** Visiting a local “campus” sex store also served as an important mechanism for normalizing female masturbation and pleasure for college women at ASU and the University of Michigan. As non-seedy, female-friendly sex stores located within blocks of their university’s main campus in primary undergraduate “going out” areas, Allure (ASU) and Hot and Healthy<sup>29</sup> (University of Michigan) were frequented by female students. In fact, the majority of my participants visited one of these stores at least once during college. In contrast to the stereotype of the sleazy sex shop, most participants found these particular stores welcoming and fun, as well as a safe space for obtaining reliable female masturbation information and tools (e.g. vibrators, lubricant). While most young women initially felt embarrassed and uncomfortable to enter these stores, after visiting with friends, many gradually became more comfortable to browse on their own, as well as to purchase a masturbation aid like a vibrator.

Most participants initially or regularly visited one of these stores “for fun” with a sexual partner or friends. Most went in just to look around, rather than make a purchase. Lauren (20, white, heterosexual, Orthodox Jewish) and her friends, for example, liked to “make fun of ... the fake toys, the blow-up boobs” at Allure, while Charlotte (18, white, heterosexual, atheist Catholic) and her friends liked to “laugh at the silly things and be like, ‘Oh, that’s an interestingly shaped dildo!’” Such excursions frequently occurred in groups as a late-night social activity or as a “rite of passage” on one’s eighteenth birthday. Alex (29, white, lesbian, non-religious), for instance, recalls visiting Hot and Healthy “very drunk” and “silly” one time with a

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<sup>29</sup> Both sex store titles are pseudonyms.

group of sorority sisters. Jamie (21, white, heterosexual, spiritual) similarly sums up her visit to Allure with her friends as “something fun that we all did together.”

Although, Tasha (22, African-American, “unlabeled” sexual identity, Baptist), “just went to be with the crowd.” When a young woman did go to make a purchase, it was rarely for herself. Rather, female friends often went together to buy a “gag” gift for a friend’s birthday or bachelorette party. Also, in some cases, a participant accompanied her friend to the sex store to help her select a vibrator.

After visiting the local sex store several times “for fun” with friends, some participants gained the comfort and confidence to go for a more “serious” visit. After going inside and realizing that the store is not “creepy,” as well as interacting with knowledgeable staff, young women often felt much more motivated and at ease to return on their own or with friends to purchase a vibrator for their personal use. Camille (27, white, heterosexual, spiritual) describes how visiting Hot and Healthy quickly became more normalized for her, “The first time I ... just went in and out. But after, it’s like any other store.” Similarly, Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist) recalls how excited and nervous she was to go on a “fun adventure” to buy a vibrator the first time, but that now it has become something “very boring and normal to do.” In this way, visiting sex stores located near campus for entertainment purposes with friends often helps young women to become more comfortable and confident to shop there later on their own.

**Sex Toy Parties.** Attending sex toy or “passion” parties had a similar normalizing effect on female college students’ understandings and experiences of self-pleasure. For Alex (29, white, lesbian, non-religious), it was at a sex toy party

early in college that she initially spoke about pleasure with others. Cynthia (21, Hispanic, heterosexual, non-religious), who previously thought “passion” parties were “weird” because it is “just a bunch of girls talking about and buying dildos and sex toys,” also attended one for the first time during college. Not only did she end up making the most purchases, but she enjoyed the experience so much that she immediately signed up to host her own party. Now she views sex toy parties as “a great way to ... teach girls how to have fun with or without a man.”

While the college academic and social environment provided a safe space for female students to gain unprecedented exposure to sexual information and activities, it is possible that these young women would have eventually gained this same knowledge later through other sources. Even though learning about female pleasure through informal conversations with peers, visiting a sex store, or attending a sex toy party, for example, often occurred during college, college students are not the only women to participate in these activities. While the college environment likely expedites the normalization of female sexuality and pleasure for female students by facilitating sexual dialogue and participation in such sexuality-related activities, it is still possible that women who do not attend college also eventually gain this knowledge through similar mediums. Although, because learning about female sexuality through a course or other university sponsored activity (which were the most reliable sources for sexual knowledge) is unique to attending college, it appears that women who attend college are not just more likely to gain sexual information earlier, but more likely to have regular access to more reliable sexual information.



## **“Knowledgeable” Peers**

For many, access to “knowledgeable” peers played a large role in normalizing female masturbation. A number of participants not only learned about female masturbation, but were encouraged to masturbate, by sexual partners or close female friends.

**Partners.** Many young women did not consider female masturbation “normal” or feel inspired to masturbate until a sexual partner encouraged them to self-stimulate on their own or during sex. In Jordan’s (21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish) case a sexual partner persuaded her to masturbate to enhance her pleasure during sex.

I was dating this Swedish guy ... We were having sex and he’s like, “You don’t touch your clitoris.” And I was like, “Am I supposed to?” And he was like, “Yes.” And I was like, “What do you mean?” ... And masturbation was okay in my household ... It was not a big deal. But, I never really understood it. I was like, “I don’t really want to masturbate. I don’t understand. I don’t think it’s bad or gross or ... immoral, but I don’t get how it’s going to get me in the mood.” And then he’s like, “Well, you should go home and work on it by yourself.” ... And then after that, I was like, “How was I not doing this before? ... This is ridiculous!”

Like Jordan, a number of participants felt that their partner introduced them to important bodily knowledge and experience, and that because of their partners, they no longer feel ignorant about pleasure. Additionally, many felt that without that push from their partner, that they would not have been able to challenge their pre-existing ideas about female masturbation as “bad.” Tasha (22, African-American, “unlabeled” sexual identity, Baptist), for example, needed her college girlfriend to “open that door” and “show [her] the way” to masturbate in order to challenge her previous conception of masturbation as “wrong” and something only “lonely”

women do. Similarly, because masturbation was against the Christian beliefs with which she was raised, Celeste (20, white, bisexual/polyamorous, Christian) did not start masturbating until her college boyfriend encouraged her. She now realizes that before her relationship she “didn’t know what an orgasm felt like, didn’t know how to give [her]self one, and was basically ignorant of an important part of [her] body.” In the same vein, because Brittany’s (21, white, heterosexual, atheist Catholic) boyfriend knew she was “naïve” and “ignorant” about pleasure and wanted to “help [her] out,” he told her, “It’s important that you feel good too, and you shouldn’t feel like [masturbation’s] any negative or bad thing.”

Even if they had previous experience self-stimulating, many young women only felt comfortable to use a vibrator during solitary masturbation after their partner encouraged them to “give it a go.” After shopping for and purchasing a vibrator together or receiving it as a gift from their partner (often for use together during partnered sex), women frequently felt more comfortable to use it on their own. As Casey (21, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) told me, “We bought it together and used it together and then I used it on my own too.” Like Casey, many young women needed a male partner to label female self-stimulation (with one’s hands or a sex toy) as normative or to physically show them how to pleasure themselves before developing the confidence to pursue it on their own.

Some heterosexual women resented being introduced to pleasure by their male partners, rather than on their own through other sources. Celia (18, Hispanic, heterosexual, no religion), for instance, begrudges the fact that she was introduced to masturbation and sexual pleasure by her boyfriend, expressing concern that her

understanding and experience of sexuality and pleasure is forever tainted by her boyfriend's influence:

I had only heard about one girl fingering herself in middle school. I finally tried masturbation because my second boyfriend ever told me to do so. Through my boyfriend I learned about my sexuality. It's just driven me crazy that I've never noticed it. It makes me wonder what it would've been like if I did it on my own ... What would I find pleasing now?

Dakota (20, white, straight/bisexual, agnostic) similarly learned that girls masturbate from her first boyfriend. Resentful that no one "sat [her] down and told [her] how to masturbate" earlier, she writes, "Finding your clitoris isn't exactly easy but no one talks about it to girls and we're just supposed to figure it out ourselves ... People assume girls don't want to touch themselves and we assume they are right." Like Celia, Dakota wishes that she had been provided with the opportunity to learn about and explore her body and sexuality independently *before* acquiring sexual knowledge through partnered interactions.

While it is positive that some young women have partners who encourage them to think more critically about female pleasure, to feel entitled to an embodied experience of sexual pleasure, and to take active steps to achieve this pleasure, the idea that young women may require "help" from their (usually male) partners to deconstruct their negative ideas about female masturbation and benefit from the "tools" of masturbation in the first place is problematic. It raises the question of why and how young men are provided access to this knowledge and a sense of entitlement to self-pleasure, while young women are not. For these women, in a sense, masturbation will always be something that was "given" to them by a partner

– often primarily for the purpose of their partnered pleasure – rather than something they learned and engaged in solely for and by themselves.

**“Go To” Friends.** While some young women had previously observed guys joking about male masturbation, until college most had never heard women talk about female masturbation (jokingly or otherwise). Like Sophie (20, white, heterosexual, agnostic), many participants heard guys “do stand up bits about jerking off” all the time. However, like Melissa (19, white, heterosexual, non-practicing Christian), most had “never heard a female friend ever” discuss masturbating. As discussed in Chapter 4, even on the rare occasion that the topic of female masturbation arose in middle or high school among a same or mixed-sex friend group, most girls would lie. Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist), for instance, recalls denying that she masturbated when some male friends inquired in high school. She says, “I don't really know why I said no. I just did because I had the feeling that it was something I was supposed to say.” Consequently, when one or more close female friends did talk about female masturbation, it had a significant normalizing influence. Nikki (19, African-American, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) remembers how it felt to hear her new college friends talk about masturbation: “These friends ... were like, ‘Oh yeah, I have these vibrators!’ And I was like, ‘Wait, wait, wait, what? Are you kidding me?’ And they were like, ‘Yeah, what am I supposed to do? Just not pleasure myself?’ And I was like ‘oh, so people actually do do this!’” Hence, it appears that it is not until college, if at all, that many women engage in discussions about female masturbation with other women for the first time.

Hearing other young women talk about their experiences with masturbation helped to challenge most participants' prior assumption that female masturbation is uncommon or something that must be hidden. They could feel a sense of solidarity with their female peers regarding masturbation, and as a result, felt more "normal" about their desires and behavior. Jess (19, white, heterosexual, Episcopalian), for instance, felt "liberated just being able to talk about [masturbation] very bluntly" with her friends. She took solace in the newfound knowledge that she's "not the only one ... not the odd one out." Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish) also felt a strong sense of relief after talking about masturbation with friends. She shares, "While not all of them had the 'yeah, I do it everyday' response that I had, just being able to ... not have it be this shameful hidden thing anymore. It totally got rid of that, thank God." Thus, it appears that girls and young women may play a vital role in helping to normalize female masturbation for their peers.

For young women who had not previously tried masturbating, either because they did not know about it or because they thought it was "wrong," hearing other women, especially close friends, speak positively about engaging in it often helped to spark further interest. Natalie's (20, white, heterosexual, culturally Catholic) "open" friends "got [her] curiosity going" about masturbation. She says, "It makes it seem not so bad to hear somebody else talk about it that you know and you're close with." Similarly, Samira (22, Iraqi-American, heterosexual), a devout Muslim, was inspired to try masturbating for the first time after a college friend lauded the benefits of "knowing yourself" and it "stuck" with her. After learning factual information about masturbation in class, and then later from this friend, Samira felt

comfortable to re-evaluate and think critically about how Islam views female pleasure. While the Koran prohibits masturbation “addiction,” because it clearly indicates that men should “pleasure” their wives, Samira concluded that female self-pleasure is not “taboo.” Based on this line of reasoning, Samira has become quite comfortable engaging in masturbation, as well as talking about it with her husband. Furthermore, because of her masturbation experience, she now possesses a strong sense of entitlement to the experience of sexual pleasure, whether alone or with her husband. She says:

Honestly, if I hadn’t taken that class, and if I hadn’t learned [about pleasure] from other people, I probably would’ve gotten married and not known what pleasure is in sex. And I probably would’ve just had a baby immediately ... It would’ve been like that. But thankfully it was the other way around ... To this point my ideology with sexuality is totally disconnected from my childhood, because it was taboo ... I decided to just move on from that.

Thus, Samira credits learning about and becoming more normalized to (self-) pleasure as life-changing in a sense, as it provided her with the knowledge and freedom to challenge deeply ingrained cultural ideologies and to feel more “in control” of her sexuality and body.

These narratives speak to the importance of an “open” or “go to” female friend as a normalizing influence in girls and young women’s sexual lives. Those participants who cited the existence of a particular friend whom they regarded as a sexual “authority” frequently possessed more openness to gaining masturbation knowledge, comfort, and experience than others. As was the case with Samira, for example, even just one conversation with a female friend or acquaintance (when paired with another source) could significantly influence a young woman’s

perspective and increase her comfort with, as well as willingness or motivation to try, masturbation.

### **Taking Active Steps to Discuss and Engage in Masturbation**

Learning that female masturbation is a healthy, normal, or at the very least, common behavior through some of the aforementioned sources is often just the first step in the masturbation normalization process. Armed with this intellectual knowledge, many young women then begin to struggle – to fight for their right to talk about or engage in masturbation in a comfortable, embodied way.

### **Struggling to Talk about Masturbation**

For example, many young women struggle to explicitly discuss masturbation with their female friends. Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for instance, says, “I don’t think we’ll ever be like ‘oh yeah, we play with ourselves.’ ... We don’t really ever talk about specifics, and we never really admit that we do it.”

Accordingly, one strategy some groups of young women employ to ease themselves into talking about the sensitive topic of masturbation is to use a “code language.” For instance, rather than overtly stating “last night I masturbated,” Camille (27, white, heterosexual, spiritual) and her friends “slyly” refer to masturbation by talking about vibrators. So while female masturbation may become more normalized and comfortable over time as a general topic of conversation, for many young women the comfort to speak about masturbation as a specific, embodied, individual experience takes more time and effort to develop.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the young women who experienced the most severely conflicted and emotionally painful masturbation-related struggles were

raised or currently identify as religiously conservative. Due to increased exposure to alternative discourses and sources of information with age, however, some of these women are able to break the female masturbation silence in their lives. While they do not necessarily develop an understanding of female masturbation as normal and healthy, they do often, at the very least, learn that masturbation is a common behavior among young women within their religious communities. This knowledge enables some young women to (at least minimally) begin to talk about and confront some of their deeply ingrained beliefs about female sexuality and pleasure, as well as experience masturbatory desire and pleasure as slightly less of a “struggle.”

Carrie (20, white, heterosexual), for example, an active Evangelical Christian, only recently discovered that masturbation addiction is a “problem” for many of the young women in the college Bible study group she leads. Shocked that she was previously unaware that young women, like young men, struggle with masturbation addiction, Carrie has come to believe that this struggle is a potentially bigger issue that needs to be addressed within her church. She says, “It is way more prevalent than we’re aware of,” reasoning, “this isn’t just something that’s like, ‘these four girls are crazy or these four girls are really unique’.” Now that she is aware that managing sexual desire and masturbation are struggles that many young women in her church experience, Carrie feels that she plays an important role in helping to “flush out what’s really going on” and determining a course of action to resolve these tensions. Despite the “darkness” of these discussions, Carrie is “excited” to engage with the young women in the group on this topic. She believes that it is important to provide



a forum for women within her religious community to share, find solidarity with others, and start to heal.

We've opened up this Pandora's box of like "everyone's dealing with this," but no one's talking about it. So it is a lot more within our church community that things are happening, and maybe things are really expressed openly with guys about sexuality, but with girls it's kind of very taboo. "No, you shouldn't be dealing with this. No, you shouldn't be having issues." But people are, so the more we're not talking about it, the more it's just being hidden and people are struggling ... Because we're ... harboring new waters ... but I feel like we're almost starting this new process of like, "Okay, if we can deal with this group of girls and we can start you guys in this path of recovering from these addictions and this freedom," than this can begin in so many other girls who haven't wanted to discuss it.

In this way, talking about sexuality openly with female peers has offered Carrie, as well as other members of her Bible study group, the opportunity to learn more about the realities of young women's experiences of sexuality within their religious community and thus to develop a sense of solidarity with one another.

Annemarie (27, white, "unlabeled" sexual identity, non-denominational Christian) similarly did not learn that other young women struggle with masturbation until becoming involved with her current church community in college. Because masturbation is something that she largely did not hear discussed earlier in her life, particularly with regards to women, Annemarie appreciates that both men and women openly share their experiences and struggles with masturbation. She finds that their "sympathy" and "understanding" in terms of this "addiction" has helped her so she can be "wise about [her] own boundaries with self." She shares how "fun" and "exciting" she finds it to discuss masturbation "publicly" with others at church:

A lot of students share about it and it's fun to – it makes me feel very excited when, especially publicly at church, women will talk about masturbation, just because it gets talked about so infrequently and it's fun to talk with students about blessing desire and drawing out in what ways you're essentially selfish in this and addicted. And do you want something different? And if you do, then let's walk through that together.

Like Carrie, despite the fact that she views engaging in masturbation as a problem, Annemarie nevertheless takes a great deal of pleasure in talking about it with others. Speaking about such a private matter in such a public way is liberating for Annemarie, as she is able to feel solidarity with other women, and locate her masturbation experience as normatively transgressive, in a sense. After engaging in these open sexuality discussions, Annemarie has come to believe that it may be possible to engage in masturbation that is not wholly "impure." While she does not feel confident that it is possible to pursue self-pleasure in a wholly "pure way" either, she shares that she has engaged in a limited number of masturbation experiences which feel less "wrong" than others:

There wasn't fantasy involved. It didn't feel like I was disrespecting anyone or being selfish in the process. And it felt that even in those moments I was brought closer to wholeness or the self, as God made me, and even hearing from or interacting with God in the process or as a result, as opposed to kicking him out of what I'm doing.

Even though masturbation is prohibited within her religious community, talking about her "addiction" with others has nonetheless helped Annemarie to develop a more positive understanding of female sexuality and pleasure. For Annemarie, speaking about masturbation with female peers, even in a negative light, has started to normalize female masturbation as a topic of conversation and an individual sexual activity. Not only is she now able to experience masturbation as

less religiously conflicting, but as described above, at times she is even able to consider that masturbation may help her feel *more* religious.

### **Struggling To Masturbate**

The final challenge (after internalizing the idea that female masturbation is healthy and normal) for many young women is to develop a sense of comfort and entitlement to the embodied experience of masturbation, and then feel empowered to take active steps to claim this right. After being socialized to conceptualize female masturbation as healthy and natural through one or more of the aforementioned sources, some young women strongly desire to gain the potential embodied knowledge and pleasurable benefits of masturbation. In some cases, as discussed in Chapter 5, they even feel societal pressure to masturbate based on a perceived expectation that women “know” their own bodies and “how” to orgasm. Despite their consistent efforts, however, they do not find masturbation pleasurable or have trouble getting “into” or feeling comfortable with it. Rather than “giving up” on masturbation like many of the young women described in Chapter 5, these women continue to push themselves and fight for their right to the embodied experience of self-pleasure. Similar to those who struggle to *not* masturbate (as discussed in Chapter 5), for many, the journey *to* masturbate is long and arduous, and often marked by emotional and physical pain and strife. The bulk of the struggle for these women is not about coming to *intellectually* understand that female masturbation is healthy and potentially pleasurable, but rather about developing the *bodily* comfort and confidence to actively engage in and enjoy self-stimulation.

**Struggling for Masturbation to Feel Emotionally Comfortable.** Despite their conscious desire to masturbate, some women continue to struggle with emotional masturbation discomfort which prevents them from self-stimulating at all. After becoming more normalized to the idea of female masturbation through a college sexuality class, Mia (23, white, heterosexual, Buddhist), for example, obsesses over the idea that she should try masturbating. She strongly believes that masturbation would be a healthy way for her to quell her loneliness and sexual desires, especially because she is in a long distance relationship. Yet, because she has felt “shy” about masturbation for so long, she still cannot bring herself to masturbate. Instead, her “horniness” consumes her, and that she can think of nothing else except satisfying herself. Sophie (20, white, heterosexual, agnostic) also repeatedly tells herself, “I’m going to try it,” but she has yet to masturbate because she continues to be too “averse” to her genitalia. Even though she believes that she would enjoy masturbating, she says, “I don’t really want to go under there and probe myself ... I just really don’t like my vagina. It’s a third armpit.” Sophie rationalizes her gradual journey to masturbation by explaining that it took her “forever” to learn how to use tampons, accepting that she is “just slowly getting acquainted to [her] vagina.” Mia and Sophie appear to accept their unease with the idea of actually pursuing self-pleasure. Rather than aspiring to challenge this discomfort, they instead hold out hope that they will naturally develop the confidence to try stimulating themselves over time.

As discussed in Chapter 5, due to a “pleasure imperative” sub-discourse embedded in broader heteronormative discourses, some young women are

socialized to believe that masturbation “success” is reflective of potential partnered sexual success. Even when they feel comfortable with the idea of masturbating on an intellectual level, some participants struggle with feeling emotionally comfortable to teach their bodies to “know” pleasure through masturbation. Lora (20, Hispanic/white, heterosexual, Methodist), for example, felt compelled to explore her own body through masturbation after learning from friends that she lacked bodily knowledge required for engaging in good partnered sex. Despite feeling inspired to pursue masturbation, she struggles to be “comfortable with [her]self” because she does not know how to masturbate and because the idea of genital self-touching continues to feel “wrong.” As such, Lora decided that masturbating with a vibrator might be more comfortable than using her hands. She subsequently purchased a vibrator, batteries, and lubricant. Despite this effort, Lora continues to be unable to bring herself to masturbate: “I feel like I make excuses. I open it up, and I have everything all planned out. I have the lube in case I need it and I have batteries ... I guess I’m scared of the unknown and that uncomfortable factor.” Lora fears that masturbating with a vibrator will also be unsuccessful. By putting off attempting to stimulate herself with the vibrator she forestalls what she sees as a likely disappointment, and subsequent reflection of her failure to develop valuable embodied sexual knowledge. She still has hope, though, as with the understanding that she has not “really gained pleasure yet,” she suggests that it is “just about getting [her]self to do it” and not giving up.

Of those women who manage to overcome their initial discomfort and engage in masturbation, many continue to struggle with masturbation feeling

emotionally uncomfortable. Like Lora, feeling pressure to “like touching [her]self,” Marianna (20, Armenian/Filipino, heterosexual, Armenian Orthodox), repeatedly forced herself to masturbate even though it never resulted in orgasm and made her feel “dirty.” She recalls thinking to herself, “I want to become a doctor. Those who want to become that, they don’t do that.” Despite the strong negative emotions which engaging in self-stimulation evoked for Marianna, she continued to try to masturbate out of a desire to “have” her orgasm, to catch up to her female peers who have “gone ahead” and “had their orgasm” at a younger age.

**Struggling for Masturbation to Feel Physically Pleasurable.** Even when young women develop an emotional comfort with masturbating, they may still struggle for masturbation to feel physically pleasurable. Molly (18, white, heterosexual, Lutheran), for instance, has spent years masturbating “unsuccessfully” out of a perceived obligation to “know” her sexual body. Making numerous efforts at self-exploration, and trying various techniques (e.g. humping a couch, water pressure), she believes that she was “close to an orgasm” a few times. In the end, however, she believes that masturbation does not work for her. She explains why she nevertheless continues to try masturbating:

It was almost out of obligation. And I was like, “Maybe masturbation would be fun?” So I had this tutorial in my head. It’s more out of expectation than, “I would like to masturbate now.” Until I am actually successful with that, then I’ll probably still feel like I’m just doing it because I’m a girl and I should explore myself ... It’s good to know what’s going on in your body.

Molly feels a societal pressure to know her sexual body and develop an understanding of how to experience pleasure. Rather than masturbating to sate physiological sexual urges, she masturbates out of a perceived obligation and

expectation to confirm that she is a “sexual being.” She continues to try masturbating with the hope that she will eventually experience self-stimulation as pleasurable and physically satisfying, proving to herself (and imagined others), that she is a sexually healthy and normal, desirous and pleasure-seeking (or rather, performing), young woman.

Because her early experiences using masturbation to explore her sexual preferences made her feel dirty, Kylie (21, white, female-attracted, non-denominational Christian) only felt motivated to try masturbating again during college because it was something her partner enjoyed. She explains her cycle of non-physically pleasurable, unsuccessful masturbation: “I did not like touching my clitoris and in fact I still find it rather painful ... It’s too much stimulation ... I never liked that because it didn’t feel good ... I wouldn’t last very long when I did that, maybe like thirty seconds, and then I would be like, ‘Okay, I tried it. The end.’” As a member of the LGBTQ community, Kylie finds it especially frustrating that she does not enjoy clitoral stimulation. Even though she does not achieve orgasm, she enjoys penetrating herself vaginally significantly more than stimulating her clitoris. She has shied away from engaging in further internal self-stimulation because of the marginalization she feels from lesbian friends who have told her, “You’re weird. You’re supposed to like guys then.” In contrast to most of the women with whom I spoke, who felt societal pressure to orgasm the “right” way through vaginal penetration (see Chapter 5), Kylie perceives that her failure to achieve pleasure and orgasm through clitoral stimulation is evidence of her failure to fit in and conform to the ideals of the LGBTQ community. She blames herself for this perceived shortfall,

saying, “It just makes me feel like there’s something very fundamentally wrong with me. Like there’s something messed up.” Kylie resents that while she is emotionally comfortable with the idea of masturbation, she is not able to physically enjoy the experience. She sees this continued struggle to enjoy masturbation as intimately connected with her struggle to achieve orgasm – alone or with a partner – and as a significant barrier to feeling comfortable and confident in her body.

**Struggling to Feel Deserving of (Self-) Pleasure.** Finally, after much hard work and struggle, some young women are eventually able to feel emotionally comfortable *and* take physical pleasure in masturbating. Feeling entitled to and deserving of self-pleasure, however, continues to be a challenge for many participants. For Jenny (22, white, pansexual, spiritual), for example, much of her struggle to masturbate has been about feeling entitled and deserving of the experience of sexual pleasure. Diagnosed with “excess male hormones” and vulvodinia, which she describes as a “sexual disorder” resulting from hormonal imbalances, for Jenny sex has always been associated with pain, not pleasure. She articulates, “I think it is only through the diagnosis of those two things have I really begun to explore my own sexuality and the understanding of my own body, and not feeling shame with liking my body or masturbation.” Even though she was not raised in a “super religious” family and was never explicitly told that masturbation is “bad,” Jenny still has difficulty accepting masturbation as pleasure that she deserves. She elaborates on how challenging it has been for her to develop an understanding that masturbation is a positive thing:



I've only recently started masturbating. I've known that I wanted to since last fall, but I haven't gotten over the mental block of it since maybe the last two or three months. Understanding that it is a natural and safe thing – I'm not going to go blind. I never believed that growing up, but there was also, always some type of again, "I don't deserve this," some type of failure I guess. Like if I don't have a partner to do this for me, then I have to do it myself, which I totally don't believe now. I think it's about knowing yourself and loving your own body ... I learned that touching myself is healthy and it's okay and it's just another part of my body. I mean, I know how my arms work, my feet and everything work, so I know how my whole vaginal area works. And so I think just accepting what it is for what it is ... I've been trying to learn it to just be okay with that it's natural.

Like many of the women described above, even though Jenny knew that she wanted to masturbate, internalizing the idea that masturbation is not "wrong" was quite arduous. Inspired to move forward with trying to masturbate upon realizing that she did not "know" her body very well, she sought to learn more about masturbation to increase her comfort with it. She emphasizes how difficult and strange it was for her to take the first step and touch herself:

I had a giant mirror and I was looking at my vagina, and I was like, "There's my lips and there's my clit" ... I remember the first time I fingered myself, I was like, "Oh my God, why does it feel like this?" I don't know what I was imagining that it was going to feel like, but to feel the muscles and everything in there was really like, "Oh my God, that's what it feels like." And that was really strange I guess, but at the same time, I started laughing after I did it. I was like, "What did I think this would be like? And what were all these thoughts, like really absurd uprooted fears that were preventing me from doing this?" The first time I did it I just put my fingers in my vagina and I was like, "Okay, there it goes. That's enough for now." That was a really big step for me.

As a result of dominant discourses which discourage girls from seeking out information about sexual desire and pleasure, let alone explore their own bodies, Jenny, like many young women, struggles emotionally and physically to challenge deeply ingrained fears about her body and sexuality, and to develop the comfort and

confidence to explore how her own genitals look and feel. Learning about and looking at her genitals was an important first step to gaining comfort with the idea of physically touching them. Gradually easing her way into masturbation by manually exploring her genitals and stimulating them, if only for a short time, helped her to gain familiarity with unexpected sensations and to feel more at ease with the idea of providing herself with pleasure in this way.

Because of Jenny's medical problems and the physical and emotional trauma associated with them, for her masturbation has largely been about healing – reclaiming control of her body and teaching herself that she is capable and deserving of more than just pain. Even though she knows intellectually that her body should be able to experience pleasure, feeling that pleasure, and developing a sense of comfort and control over those feelings, was significantly more challenging.

It took me a while to get to the point of comfort with [masturbating] because I would start to feel good and then my negative self started talking, and “I’m not deserving of it” would come back, and I would be like, “Oh, you don’t deserve this. Stop.” Or, “You don’t know what you’re doing. This is gross. Stop.” ... Probably over the past six months, I’ve had to very slowly ... Really telling myself that it’s okay to do this and be like, “I’m in control. I can stop. I can do this for one minute or for twenty minutes.” And, “I could stop. I can stop.” And, “I know what I’m doing” and “This is what I want to do. This is what I don't want to do,” and “I want to experiment with this.” Or, “I don't want to today.” And when I first started I had to make myself schedule it, like “Tonight I am masturbating.” Because I would just keep putting it off, putting it off because I was scared.

Not only did Jenny constantly have to fend off her inner demons, which were insistently telling her she is not deserving or entitled to pleasure, and that she is bad or gross for engaging in masturbation, but she also had to “unlearn” all the sexual pain she had experienced in the past as a result of her medical problems. She could

not open herself to the idea of experiencing self-pleasure until she felt completely in control of her mind and her body.

Even though she has now reached a point where she enjoys masturbating and is able to experience orgasm, for Jenny it is still a constant effort to assure herself that she is deserving of this pleasure:

Even now I have to mentally prepare for it, to touch myself. I just lay there and am like, "Okay, this is time for you. I can enjoy this ... This is about me, for me, and I can stop if I want." I still have to give myself a pep talk before every time I do it to the point that now I can masturbate and reach orgasm by myself without feeling guilty, or ashamed or scared or anything. I still have to preface it with, "I deserve this."

It is only by re-coding her body to feel entitled to expect and enjoy experiencing pleasure through masturbation in this way that Jenny feels that she may eventually be capable of engaging in positive and pleasurable partnered sexual encounters. She conveys how much more confident and comfortable she felt to instruct her partner during a recent sexual encounter now that she possesses a more comprehensive awareness of what feels good. Jenny lauds the fruits of her masturbation labors:

I learned to be more comfortable with myself, to love myself more. And after I masturbate and I orgasm, I feel good. Yeah, I rock! Those feel good feelings of sex are there, so I see no downside to it. And I also ... feel more in power of what's going on and more comfortable being with someone else, because I know how to be with myself now.

It was only through the embodied sexual knowledge that masturbation provided that Jenny was able to begin to move beyond *knowing* intellectually that she is capable and deserving of (self-) pleasure, to actually *feeling* capable and deserving of that pleasure. Now that she possesses a stronger sense of control over her body and sexuality, she finds it easier to resist residual negative thought or fears related to

her prior medical issues, and thus to achieve emotional and physical sexual satisfaction whether alone and with a partner.

While most of the women with whom I spoke do not have as extensive and traumatic a history of physical pain associated with sex as Jenny, a number did express struggling with more acute medical issues that negatively influenced their experience of sexual pleasure. Frequent yeast infections and urinary tract infections, or the symptoms of sexually transmitted infections, contributed to many women learning at an early age that sex is primarily painful. The potential emotional and physical implications of young women experiencing such continuous sex-related pain largely go unrecognized, as even Jenny's highly painful medical conditions went unacknowledged and undiagnosed for years. Jenny's narrative demonstrates how masturbation can be an invaluable teaching tool for such women, that through the pursuit of self-stimulation they may be able to gradually teach their bodies how to "know" pleasure, and to learn that they have a right not only to the absence of pain, but to expect pleasure as well. Her narrative also serves as a reminder of how difficult gaining access to sexual pleasure can be for women, that pleasure is not necessarily automatic, but rather is a journey, a process that varies for each individual woman; even masturbation, which naively appears as the simplest, most accessible of pleasures, can require significant effort and hard work to be "successful."

### **Conclusion**

The narratives presented in this chapter illustrate the power of alternative sexuality discourses to facilitate a challenge to (often deeply ingrained) negative

ideas about female sexuality and pleasure. The absence of positive cultural discourses on female masturbation as a part of early socialization makes it difficult for many girls to reach a point where they feel emotionally and physically prepared to expect and experience sexual pleasure, whether alone or with a partner. Gaining access to information about or being provided with a safe space for discussing masturbation in late adolescence or college helps to more normalize female masturbation as a general topic, as well as an individual sexual behavior.

As a major theme in participants' narratives was the lack of reliable, factual knowledge on female genital physiology and pleasure, it appears that much of the physical pain and emotional frustration many of these women experienced could have largely been avoided if they simply had been provided with information on the logistics of female genital anatomy and *how* to masturbate earlier. As long as negative secular and religious discourses (and silences) on female sexuality and pleasure are the dominant available discourses for young women to draw upon to interpret their own desires and experiences, it is likely that many young women will continue to endure countless sexual struggles. Even the absence of a negative female masturbation discourse is not enough, because, as discussed in Chapter 4, most women appear to interpret a silence on the matter as equivalent (or even worse) than a specifically prohibitive female masturbation discourse.

With that said, in some cases there may be positive value to even a negative disruption in the female masturbation silence. For example, as discussed in Chapter 5, the lack of opportunity for young women to discuss masturbation within conservative religious communities can be highly detrimental to their physical,

emotional, and spiritual well-being. The narratives presented in this chapter illustrate how “liberating” being granted the opportunity to talk about their masturbation “addiction” with others can be for these young women. When it is only acknowledged that men will likely “struggle” with masturbation, and completely ignored that women might possess sexual desires (let alone independently act on them), women who do experience these “struggles” feel completely and utterly alone. They have no choice but to assume that there is something innately “wrong” with them for possessing such feelings and engaging in such behaviors. That being the case, even though their behavior may be considered “wrong” and non-normative within their religious community, the knowledge that one’s experience is common and shared is invaluable. If the fact that women possess sexual desires and “struggle” with masturbation (similarly to men) becomes common knowledge within these communities, this might increasingly normalize this “struggle” or “addiction” for women, in the sense that it is accepted within a given religious community that women might require resources for coping and overcoming their “addiction.” At the very least, this would grant women within these religious communities a sense of validation, the knowledge that their feelings and experiences are not in fact, unique, but shared by others. As an acknowledged, recognized transgression, we can hope that women in these communities might experience masturbation as (at least) slightly less of a struggle. While a prohibitive religious discourse on female masturbation does not help to deconstruct ideologies about masturbation as sinful and wrong, internalizing the knowledge that the desire to masturbate is both common and expected among women is an important first

step in reducing the level of internal turmoil and emotional pain these young women experience.

These narratives demonstrate the power of even a one-time influence, such as a single class lecture, conversation with a friend or partner, or attending a sex toy party, for helping to normalize female masturbation. We can imagine the tremendous normalizing potential of girls being given access to these kinds of alternative discourses throughout their childhood and adolescence. Thus, we can see how important it is to generate alternative sexuality discourses through a variety of mediums (e.g. media, sexual education), as the more positive discourses on female sexuality and pleasure available to young women and the more pervasive these discourses, the more likely young women will be to question, critically evaluate, and resist dominant ideologies. Theoretically, the more competing discourses on female sexuality and pleasure available, the less weight any given discourse should carry. As a result, girls and young women would more readily internalize the idea that female desire and pleasure are healthy and normative (whether partnered or alone), and feel more entitled to take active measures toward claiming their right to the embodied experience of desire and pleasure.

It is important to acknowledge the class privilege associated with gaining access to these alternative sexuality discourses. For instance, most of the young women with whom I spoke did not obtain information about female masturbation until attending college. They frequently learned or talked about female masturbation with others for the first time in an on-campus residential environment (e.g. a roommate, sorority, dorm sexual health workshop). Hence, it seems likely

that young women who do not attend college at all, or who attend in a non-residential capacity, may not gain access to this information until much later, if at all. In addition, it appears that private, unsupervised access to the Internet may play an important role in providing knowledge about female pleasure. It is only those girls who possess unrestricted access to their own computer or mobile device who have any possibility of obtaining information in this way.

These narratives further demonstrate the complexity of understanding what it means to possess or enact sexual agency in the context of female masturbation. As discussed in previous chapters, gendered sexuality discourses largely influence many young women's capacity to enjoy and experience masturbation. Disciplines of femininity, such as the norm of female purity, inhibit many young women's ability to experience and exercise sexual agency with regard to masturbation because actively seeking pleasure in this way signifies a lack of sexual innocence (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1992). While this kind of sexual assertiveness is generally considered consistent with traditional norms of masculinity, female assertiveness may be considered as a kind of "perverse femininity" (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1992; Albanesi 2010, 145). As a result, a number of young women who possess a positive understanding of female masturbation and who masturbate do not necessarily feel "in control" of their bodies or their minds. Thus, while young women who possess the capacity and desire to act and who take active steps to masturbate might possess sexual agency on some levels, this research suggests that because these young women do not necessarily *feel* sexually agentic, they lack sexual agency in other dimensions. Hence, it is apparent how sexually agency is not something a



young woman absolutely possesses or lacks, but rather consists of numerous aspects that may be exercised or experienced (or *not* exercised or experienced) in various ways.

Based on the narratives of participants who engage in, and continue to engage in, significant struggles *to* masturbate, we can see that simply knowing, on an intellectual level, that masturbation is normal and healthy is not enough. For many this is only one step toward claiming the right to self-pleasure and feeling sexually "in control." It takes time for girls and young women to deconstruct deeply ingrained traditional sexuality discourses, to teach their bodies to "know" that masturbation is normal and healthy. Only then can most young women feel emotionally comfortable and confident enough to masturbate. In addition, it often takes extensive masturbation "practice" for young women to experience masturbation as physically pleasurable, as well as to internalize the idea that sexual pleasure is a right to which they should feel entitled. Thus, coming to experience masturbation in an embodied, wholly pleasurable, and empowering way is a journey.

The idea that achieving (self-) pleasure is a process that often requires hard work and significant struggle speaks further to the need to expose youth to diverse information and representations regarding female pleasure via multiple sources throughout their lives. Then, girls' journeys to pleasure could begin earlier (as boys do), instead of in late adolescence or early adulthood (if at all). By the time they are of an age to engage in partnered sexual relations, girls will have had the opportunity to develop a strong independent understanding of their sexual bodies, desires, and

pleasures. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, there are significant positive benefits for those young women who do (eventually) gain access to this embodied sexual knowledge through masturbation.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE BENEFITS OF NORMALIZING FEMALE MASTURBATION

The previous chapter discussed the factors that led a minority of girls and young women to reject negative discourses about female masturbation and to adopt positive attitudes toward it. As I will show, these positive attitudes and the positive masturbatory experiences that follow from them give girls and women a better understanding of their capacity for pleasure and potential obstacles to pleasure. In turn, this embodied sexual knowledge enables these young women to feel more in control of their sexuality and more comfortable claiming their rights to sexual pleasure and safety, either alone or with a partner. These changes can lead girls and women to become more aware of, and more likely to challenge, traditional gender norms and double standards of sexual behavior.

#### **Sexual Subjectivity, Pleasure, and Health**

As illustrated in previous chapters, the denial of an agentic sexual subjectivity to girls is continually reinforced through supposedly “legitimate” sources of sexual knowledge, such as the sexual education classroom, religious institutions, or discussions with parents. While boys hear about their bodies as a site of agency and sexual pleasure through depictions and discussions of the penis and ejaculation, girls must contend with a “missing discourse of desire” (Fields 2008; Fine 1988). Female bodily experiences and pleasures are obscured through the offering of only disembodied or clinical representations of female genitalia and the framing of female sexual organs as reproductive, rather than as potential sites of pleasure (Fields 2008). The absence of discussion regarding female (self-) pleasure

inhibits young women's ability to experience "embodied desire" – to feel and identify sexual feelings as connected to genital experience (Lamb 2010). While the "tools" of masturbation teach boys about their bodies (Kimmel 2005), girls are denied access to this embodied sexual knowledge. Without a script for self-pleasure, pleasure (whether partnered or alone) often becomes "reactive," rather than "proactive," for girls (Gagnon and Simon 2005, 62). Moreover, because they possess embodied sexual knowledge that girls do not, boys often have an advantage in early heterosexual encounters.

Providing girls and young women with access to discourses that may help them to develop an embodied understanding of pleasure may significantly increase their capacity to feel sexually empowered and to exercise control over their sexual lives. Young women who express awareness of their personal pleasure also often feel a sense of empowerment to expect pleasure (Hogarth and Ingham 2009). The sense of control derived from knowing and wanting sexual pleasure allows them to feel more empowered and entitled to make informed decisions over their own desires and needs. More mentally connected to what is happening in their own bodies, girls in particular may become less vulnerable to the power of others and less likely to participate in sexual activities based on others' wants (which they may later regret) (Tolman 2002).

In this chapter I focus on the minority of young women for whom masturbation has become more normalized. As I will show, when masturbation becomes more normalized, young women are increasingly able to develop an embodied sexual subjectivity, and to lead happy and safe sexual lives. I illustrate the

importance of engaging in sexual self-exploration for acquiring an awareness of gender and sexual inequalities, and gaining the confidence and motivation to advocate for and challenge these inequalities on an individual and broader, societal level.

### **Developing an Embodied Understanding of Female Sexuality and Pleasure**

After internalizing the idea that female self-pleasure is normal, physically and psychologically healthy, and a sexual right, on an intellectual and embodied level, young women become less susceptible to the disciplinary power of mainstream hegemonic sexual discourses and silences. Because young women for whom masturbation has become more normalized in this way possess a deeply ingrained positive (rather than negative) understanding of female sexuality and self-pleasure, they are able to more critically interpret, and consequently resist, dominant social ideologies. As a result, they are less likely to feel compelled to monitor or regulate their solitary sexual behavior, and experience fewer internal conflicts or stresses associated with masturbation. They are more likely to experience masturbation as wholly pleasurable, empowering, and liberating, rather than emotionally and physically painful.

For example, while most participants tended to interpret the lack of societal representations and discussion of female masturbation to mean that their solitary desires and behaviors are unusual, the girls and young women discussed in this chapter assumed the opposite. Because they have deeply internalized the notion that female masturbation is normal, they take for granted that all young women should and do masturbate. Because Julia (24, white, heterosexual, non-religious), for

example, is so comfortable being “verbal” and open about her masturbation experience with others, she still assumes that “other women ... are doing it” even if “no one is telling [her].” Skyler (19, white, heterosexual, spiritual) similarly reached a point where she started to assume, “Everybody does it. Everybody’s doing it. All the guys do it. All the girls do it too.” In her opinion, “It shouldn’t even be a question. You should just assume everybody masturbates.” Because they presuppose that most, if not all, girls and women masturbate, Julia and Skyler see nothing abnormal with their masturbatory behavior, and have no need to police their feelings or behaviors. Thus, cultural silences around female sexuality and pleasure do not appear to have the same regulatory effect on them as other girls and young women who have internalized more negative ideologies about female masturbation.

Freed from some of the constraints of regulatory sexuality discourses, participants for whom masturbation became more normalized were able to view masturbation as an important, meaningful, and positive component of their lives. Ruth (23, white, heterosexual polyamorous, atheist), for example, conceives of masturbation as something “really important in [her] life because it’s part of the human experience.” Likewise, masturbation is a constant in Cole’s (20, Asian/Hispanic, female-attracted, Buddhist/Christian) life, as essential as eating and sleeping. What is more, they regard masturbation as a core aspect of their identity. Many felt this way because masturbation has been a part of who they are for so long. Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for instance, feels more “in tune” with herself because masturbation has “been in [her] consciousness for a really long time.” Carmen (22, Latina, queer, atheist) similarly feels “grateful” for masturbation

because it is the thing she has “stuck with” and done the longest in her life.

Accordingly, most strongly believed that their life would be worse if they did not masturbate, and that their life would be even better if they had begun to masturbate earlier. For this reason, some young women feared “losing” masturbation. Jordan (21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish), for instance, says, “[Masturbation’s] definitely something that ... I hope nobody ever tries to take away from me. I hope I never lose a hand. I’d be really sad.” Unlike the many young women who resent that they must “resort” to masturbating to achieve sexual pleasure, these young women embrace the central role that self-pleasure plays in their lives.

Some conceived of masturbation as such an essential part of their day-to-day lives that they viewed it as a mundane, routine activity. Because masturbation is such an ingrained part of their regular rituals, in contrast to most participants, they spent more time actually masturbating but far less time (in comparison with their peers) simply contemplating masturbation. For Carmen (22, Latina, queer, atheist), for example, “masturbation is ... like brushing her teeth.” Ruth (23, white, heterosexual polyamorous, atheist) also views masturbating as a “get it over with, get on with your day” thing. Unlike many of the women discussed in previous chapters, participants who are comfortable with masturbation do not view their regular urges to masturbate as an “addiction.” As Karla (19, Mexican, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) says, “It’s routine for me. Like I’ll try not to and I just, nope! I’ve got to. It’s like a habit. I don’t feel like I’m addicted to masturbation. I just feel like I’ve been doing it for so long it’s like my routine.” Rather than agonize over

the normalcy of their sexual “needs,” young women like Carmen, Ruth, and Karla accept self-stimulation as a regular and essential component of their daily existence.

Due to masturbation becoming a more “normal” and expected part of their daily lives, these women were able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of their body’s capacity (and limits) for pleasure, and subsequently were able to develop a stronger appreciation for and relationship with their sexual bodies. Unlike the many women who believed and accepted that achieving partnered and self-pleasure is “easier” for men, for example, after gradually developing an embodied understanding of their sexual bodies and pleasure through masturbation, many of these women come to believe that pleasure is “easier” and “better” for women. Rather than feeling as if female bodies are inadequate or deficient in comparison to male bodies, they embrace perceived gendered bodily differences and celebrate what they see as an enhanced female capacity for pleasure. Julia (24, white, heterosexual, non-religious), for example, appreciates being able to masturbate as a woman because it is “a lot more incognito” than male masturbation. She says, “You could, right now, go into the bathroom, sit down, masturbate, leave, and no one would know!” In contrast, she argues that men “have this huge bulge in their pants and they have to do something with all that semen. You can get away with it as a woman a hell of a lot easier!”

In contrast to the many participants who felt constrained or conflicted by their solitary sexual desires and less in control of their body and sexuality, young women who were comfortable with masturbation felt more knowledgeable, comfortable, and “in control” of their bodies. They not only felt more entitled to and



deserving of self-pleasure, but excited and empowered to sexually self-explore. Unapologetic about feeling deserving of self-pleasure, Michelle (21, white, bisexual, agnostic), for example, writes, “I love to masturbate. I feel as though it’s okay to be a little selfish once and [sic] a while and ‘just do me’.” Hayley (23, white, heterosexual, no religion) similarly “loves” being able to give herself an orgasm whenever she desires “without feeling shame.”

### **Claiming the Right to Solitary Sexual Pleasure**

Rather than allow dominant social norms to dictate their sexual feelings and behaviors, armed with intellectual and embodied sexual knowledge, young women for whom masturbation was more normalized felt increasingly comfortable embracing their right to pursue self-pleasure on their own terms. Instead of regulating their masturbation-related emotions and activities in order to conform to perceived social pressures (e.g. pleasure should be “given” by a man or penis), they resisted traditional gendered sexuality discourses by masturbating whenever, however, and wherever they desire and feels most pleasurable. Because they possess a more realistic, embodied understanding of female sexuality and pleasure, rather than chastise themselves for violating gendered social norms, they embrace their capacity to give themselves pleasure and to feel connected to their bodies. As this section will show, women who are comfortable with masturbation are more likely to engage in and appreciate non-goal-oriented masturbation, masturbation as an autonomous (rather than Other-oriented) activity, masturbation that feels good on an embodied level, and public or semi-public masturbation.

## **Non-Goal-Oriented Masturbation**

In contrast to the majority of participants, women who were comfortable with masturbation tended to be less goal-oriented in their masturbation experiences. Rather than being preoccupied with orgasmic “success” or with pleasure being “hard” to achieve, these women appreciated masturbation for the process. Elisa (18, white/Mexican, heterosexual, culturally Catholic), for example, enjoys masturbation much less when she “rushes it.” Additionally, Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist) sees masturbation as an “exploratory journey” where she challenges herself to masturbate in different ways and spaces. Jordan (21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish) recalls a particularly pleasurable and lengthy masturbation experience:

One time I masturbated for like five hours. Just like chilling in my room. I was just like “you know what, this is fun and I’m not going to stop.” It was like nine at night and I was like “now it’s like two in the morning. Maybe I should go to bed. No, you know what, I’m just going to keep going because I don’t have anything to do tomorrow.” I was just like, “this is awesome.”

Like Elisa and Shanna, Jordan views masturbation as not simply a means to an orgasm, but as an enjoyable pastime in itself. These women understand that masturbation is a process, and appreciate and take pleasure in that journey. Moreover, because their enjoyment of masturbation is not necessarily contingent on the (non-labor intensive) achievement of orgasm, they do not experience the dissatisfaction or sense of bodily inadequacy that often accompanies “unsuccessful” or laborious masturbation for other young women.

### **Masturbation as Autonomous, Valued Activity**

Unlike the majority of participants who viewed masturbation as “lesser” than partnered sex, women who were comfortable with masturbation largely perceived of masturbation as a valued, autonomous activity that they engage in for their own well-being. Instead of masturbating as a “last resort” because they lack access to a partner, they take pleasure in being sexual on their own. As they ingrained the view that self-pleasure is *not* “pathetic” or “less than” partnered pleasure, but rather is a compliment, they were able to resist dominant discourses which suggest that masturbation is inferior to partnered sex or that female sexuality should always be Other-oriented.

In fact, what some of these women like most about masturbation is not thinking about anyone or anything, and just focusing on themselves. Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for example, says “Sometimes I don't think about anything. Because sometimes it's just the experience of being with myself ... I don't really need to think about guys to feel turned on.” Likewise, Jordan (21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish) thinks masturbation is “awesome” because she is “not thinking about shit, except for [her].” In viewing masturbation as distinct from partnered sex in this way, they did not scrutinize or compare and contrast their masturbatory and partnered sexual experiences like the majority of participants, or experience masturbation as an emotional or physical struggle.

**Masturbation as Better than Partnered Sex.** Not only were young women for whom masturbation was more normalized increasingly likely to consider masturbation as equivalent or complimentary to partnered sex, but some

challenged dominant sexuality ideologies even further with the belief that masturbation can be *better* than partnered sex. Some found masturbation more pleasurable because it lacked the emotional stress that they associate with partnered sex. According to Jordan (21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish), for example, “Being by myself is a lot more fun ... In the shower I can get all the shit done and I’m super relaxed after, and it’s good to be by myself without any emotional baggage that comes along with anybody, male or female.” Similarly, Bianca (22, Hispanic, bisexual, non-practicing Catholic) writes:

I haven’t had sex since mid-February. The partner I was with then started ignoring me and it really hurt my feelings, so I’ve decided that I don't want to date again for a while. Instead I’ve been concentrating on masturbating, and it’s surprising how much more pleasure I feel when I’m masturbating, than when I am with a partner ... Masturbating is a great part of my life in which I know I can take some alone time and make myself feel better.

Like Jordan, Bianca discovered the joys of feeling sexually independent, of not physically or emotionally relying on a partner for satisfaction. In this way, masturbation has not only offered her the freedom and space to heal from the emotional wounds of her previous relationship, but to learn the pleasure one can derive from sexual self-sufficiency.

Others simply found solitary masturbation to be more physiologically pleasurable than partnered sex. Many felt this way because their partners lacked the sexual knowledge or skills to give them the same pleasure that they can provide for themselves. For example, according to Jess (19, white, heterosexual, Episcopalian), “it’s really just by myself that I get ... anything out of [sex].” Some, like Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) feel more comfortable with their bodies, and less self-

conscious to experience pleasure, alone: “I actually think the most enjoyable sexual experiences I’ve had are by myself ... When I’m by myself it’s more for me, and I know what I’m doing and what I want. And it’s just ... better with myself.” Similarly, Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual) told me, “I always feel like I can give myself one better ... because obviously I know where I like it ... It feels good ... when other people do it, but somehow never as good as when I can do it.” Even though it is because young men often lack the know-how or motivation to stimulate their female partners in a way that feels pleasurable that young women frequently do not experience orgasm during partnered sex, many young women nonetheless feel sexually inadequate as a result. Thus, it is only through masturbation that some young women are able to experience that pleasure.

In contrast to the majority of participants who relied on their partners to provide them with pleasure, some of these women were so comfortable with masturbation that they actually viewed their partners as obstacles to their pleasure. Dakota (20, white, straight/bisexual, agnostic), for instance, says, “I know how to get myself off, it’s just my partner gets in the way of that a lot of time.” Likewise, Kayla (21, black, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) finds it easier and more pleasurable to masturbate than to make the effort to instruct a partner that she is not emotionally invested in on how to please her: “By myself, I know what I like ... I know what sensation and feelings feel good to me, so that’s why it’s pleasurable. But then with other people ... they’d just really experiment ... those experiences aren’t really pleasurable.” Nora (29, Arab-American, heterosexual, Christian) even resorts to masturbating behind her boyfriend’s back to quench her sexual urges, because

she views sex with him as a potential hindrance to her pleasure. She explains, “Sometimes when my boyfriend is sleeping, I’d sneak downstairs early in the morning to masturbate with my vibrator on the couch. I didn’t want to offend him but knew that it would be so much easier and faster for me to do it alone over doing it during sex.” By conceptualizing the experience of self-pleasure as superior to partnered sexual interactions in this way, these young women resist dominant heteronormative discourses which dictate that the “best” pleasure should always be “given” by a (male) partner.

**Masturbating for Non-Sexual Reasons.** Participants who are comfortable with masturbation further challenge the notion that female sexuality should be solely Other- and romance-oriented by often opting to masturbate for non-sexual reasons. By masturbating for a variety of reasons *not* associated with “horniness” or lacking a sexual partner, they disassociate masturbatory desire from partnered sexual desire. They resist dominant discourses which suggest that masturbation is solely for sexually repressed, pathetic, and lonely women who are unable to “get a man.” Instead, they appreciate the non-emotional physiological benefits their body can offer them through masturbation, and seek to maximize these benefits to improve their general well-being and happiness.

For example, one of the most common motivations for masturbating among women for whom self-pleasure was more normalized was to facilitate relaxation and sleep. As early as elementary school, before she even “had a word for it,” Carmen (22, Latina, queer, atheist) would masturbate at night before bed to help herself relax and fall asleep. Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish)

similarly masturbates to get to sleep even when she's not "in the mood." Many also masturbated for its associated stress or anxiety-relieving "release." Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist), for instance, currently masturbates for these benefits more frequently than "for the sake of pleasure." Because she is an "analytical, thoughtful left-brain person," Yana also appreciates the way masturbation "shuts down [her] brain" and helps her to "escape" and relax. Unlike many young women who experience masturbation as stressful and anxiety inducing because it violates perceived ideals of femininity, because Carmen, Yana, and Shanna have developed an understanding of their sexuality as self-oriented – of their bodies as for themselves rather than for another person – they are able to appreciate both the sexual and non-sexual, physical and psychological, benefits of self-stimulation and orgasm. Hence, they feel entitled to employ masturbation as a tool of stress relief and relaxation in a way that girls and young women with more Other-oriented understandings of their sexuality often do not.

Masturbating as a break or as a form of self-reward was also common among this group of women. They viewed masturbation as any other form of entertainment, as a way to treat themselves, much like going shopping or to a spa. Molly (18, white, heterosexual, Lutheran) compares masturbating to eating dessert, "Isn't it just like eating cake? Are you not allowed to just indulge and have cake?" Masturbation most frequently served as a study or homework break or incentive. For instance, masturbation is Di's (27, Chixan@/Mestizo/brown, queer, atheist) "prize" after completing an assignment. Similarly, Carmen (22, Latina, queer, atheist) will tell herself, "I'll finish this chapter and then I'm allowed one orgasm!" In

this way, women like Molly, Di, and Carmen conceive of masturbation much like any other leisure activity, as something they can give themselves as a reward for working hard or simply because they deserve to relax and feel good. They may temporarily withhold masturbation from themselves, not out of shame or guilt, but because they find it so enjoyable that it can sometimes help to motivate them to be productive in other aspects of their lives. Masturbation is particularly appealing to this end because unlike going to a spa or eating cake, for example, the pursuit of self-pleasure does not (have to) cost money, does not contain any calories, and can be done at home. Thus, in contrast to other forms of indulgence that may be followed by feelings of regret (e.g. because one spent too much money or ate something unhealthy), for young women who have come to understand female self-stimulation as healthy and normal on an intellectual and embodied level the repercussions of masturbating feel primarily positive.

These narratives illustrate how some young women challenge the dominant norms and ideologies which stipulate that a woman must prefer partnered over solitary pleasure, that she must prefer to “be given” pleasure by a (usually male) partner over “giving” pleasure to herself. Through masturbation, these young women found a way to fulfill their physiological needs, and to experience embodied pleasure, without emotional or physical discomfort.

### **Masturbation That Feels Good on an Embodied Level**

In addition, rather than masturbating in the way they think is most “normal” or “right,” young women who were comfortable with masturbation were more likely to masturbate in whatever way *feels* emotionally and physically good regardless of



its perceived social acceptability. Unconcerned with adhering to the heteronormative expectation that the penis is the center of male and female sexual pleasure, for example, these women did not engage in vaginal self-penetration unless it felt pleasurable. Many of these women also celebrated, rather than disparaged or feared, their genitalia, by preferring the intimacy of skin-on-skin self-stimulation. Finally, some of these women challenged the idea that viewing pornography is “unfeminine” and that women are only aroused by love and romance by incorporating the positive aspects of mainstream pornography into their masturbatory experiences. Hence, unlike the bulk of participants, these women were able to maximize the pleasure in their lives without significant negative physical or emotional consequences.

**Avoiding Self-Penetration (if Non-Pleasurable).** Young women who were comfortable with masturbation were *less* likely to vaginally penetrate themselves during masturbation if it did not feel good. Instead, consistent with findings from previous research (Fahs and Frank 2014), they challenged the “myth of the vaginal orgasm” by engaging in a variety of techniques for solely engaging in clitoral stimulation that felt emotionally comfortable and physically pleasurable. Markeshia (21, black, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for example, explains how she feels about self-penetration:

With fingering, I just feel stupid ... I just don't like it. It just doesn't bring me any pleasure. It's just dumb. Like I noticed when I play with the clit, that's what turns me on. I've made myself come, I gave myself an orgasm from playing with that spot, so I was like I'm just going to do this!

Hence, it was through the process of masturbating that Markeshia was able to recognize that female sexual pleasure does *not* necessarily derive from vaginal penetration.

While some women utilized vibrators to stimulate their clitoris, a number of these young women engaged in other techniques, such as humping or rubbing (of pillows, beds, blankets, chairs, and so on) to externally stimulate their clitoris during masturbation instead of penetration. Because “fingering [her]self never really did anything,” Ciara (30, white, heterosexual, Catholic), for instance, masturbates by “clench[ing] a pillow between [her] legs.” Cole (20, Asian/Hispanic, female-attracted, Buddhist/Christian) similarly “dry hump[s] scrunched up clothes” because no other masturbation techniques feel good. Leah (19, white, heterosexual, conservative Jewish) also believes that a “dildo” would not work for her because she prefers to “move around” something like a chair or bed that is “stationary and solid” to stimulate her clitoris through her clothes. Water pressure was another technique that many of these women preferred for stimulating their clitoris, because, as Karen (21, Asian, heterosexual, Christian) says, “there’s something about the way water feels in masturbating [that] is so much better.” Like Markeshia, these young women learned through their experimentation with various methods of self-stimulation that vaginal penetration and vibrators are not the only or necessarily most pleasurable masturbation techniques.

**Preferring Skin-on-Skin Genital Contact.** A number of women for whom masturbation was more normalized challenged the popular conception that using a vibrator or other sex toy to masturbate is the most common or “best” method, as

well as the notion that female genitalia is “disgusting,” by preferring skin-on-skin clitoral stimulation. In contrast to the majority of participants, they cherish the knowledge, intimacy, and pleasure associated with direct hand-on-genital contact.

Some, like Yvonne (20, Hispanic, bi-straight, Christian), believe that using a vibrator to masturbate does not allow you to “take ownership of your sexuality” or know your body in the same way as using your hands. She says, “I think that that starts when you can do it by yourself and you’re feeling comfortable doing it by yourself, and you don’t rely on [a vibrator].” Skyler (19, white, heterosexual, spiritual) similarly emphasizes the importance of learning about sex and pleasure by “practicing self-exploration and being able to stimulate your own body with your hands,” rather than using a “mechanical tool.” These women take pride in being sexually independent, in not being reliant on an external entity to give them pleasure or teach them about their bodies. As Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) says, “you don’t have to buy a dildo or a vibrator ... just to be with yourself and know yourself and have an orgasm.” By preferring to stimulate themselves manually, and to really “know” their bodies without the aid of a purchasable sex toy product, young women like Yvonne, Skyler, and Kara resist dominant cultural discourses which link female sexuality and consumerism.

Women who were comfortable with masturbation tended to prefer direct skin-on-skin contact during masturbation to other methods because it feels more natural and helps them to feel more in tune with their bodies. Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist), for instance, prefers masturbating “by hand” over using a vibrator because “it feels more natural and more human.” Similarly, Camille (27, white,

heterosexual, spiritual) feels more “sensual” and “connected” with herself “when there is not just plastic and there is just skin.” Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) even believes that masturbating without a sex toy can be a “very spiritual experience.” Rather than feeling like masturbating is a substitute for partnered sex and resenting that they must “resort” to masturbating, these young women take pleasure in being physically intimate with themselves, without a partner. For example, while Jenny (22, white, pansexual, spiritual) enjoys using a vibrator at times because “it’s faster than just being by myself,” she also says, “sometimes ... I just want to do it by myself and I just want to be with myself.” Thus, in addition to taking pleasure in the intimacy they experience by directly stimulating their own bodies through masturbation, some women also derive a sense of empowerment from the sexual self-sufficiency and bodily comfort and confidence that masturbating without an external aid (e.g. vibrator) or buffer (e.g. clothing) implies.

Others find that using their hands to stimulate their genitalia is more physically pleasurable than using a “mechanical” or “predictable” sex toy. Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist), for instance, prefers to masturbate manually because vibrators are “lax in variety” and “there’s not a lot of things you can do.” In the same vein, despite the appeal of having a “machine” to do all the “work” for her, Ana (25, Latina, heterosexual, no religion) nevertheless believes that vibrators are “boring.” She feels that the orgasms she manually gives herself are better because she has to build up her arousal gradually and “work for it more.” Jordan (21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish) explains how she can “get the job done” better without a vibrator:

I know the rhythm, the way. I know when I can feel it, when I'm about to be there. I know which way to do it ... The vibrator is just ... stagnant. Just like the same pulse over and over and over again. Sometimes you need it faster or slower, but sometimes the vibrator can't keep up with that. So it's like I can just do it myself. And I'm just like, "I don't need that." It's too complicated for me. I'm just like, "Me and my hand. I'm good."

Unlike the many young women who resent that achieving orgasm through self-stimulation can take a lot of "work," young women like Shanna, Ana, and Jordan venerate the process of masturbating to orgasm as a form of skilled labor. They take pride in the complexity of their bodies and sexuality, viewing the difficulty of manually stimulating oneself to orgasm as a welcome challenge. Even though masturbating sometimes feels like a "job" as a result, these young women nevertheless embrace the opportunity to be "in touch" with and please themselves.

In contrast to the many participants who shied away from directly stimulating their genitalia, women for whom masturbation was more normalized challenge the notion that female genitalia is "gross" or "dirty" by embracing the experience of physically touching themselves. By *not* preferring to feel as if someone or something else is "giving" them their pleasure during masturbation, these young women challenge the assumption that women should be sexually reliant on their (usually male) partners or a phallic substitute, and essentially ignorant about their own bodies. In fact, these narratives demonstrate how important it is to these women that they know more about and feel more in control of their own sexual bodies than anyone or anything else.

**Comfort Consuming Internet Pornography.** In contrast to their peers, young women who were comfortable with masturbation were also significantly

more comfortable and positive about consuming Internet pornography. Rather than punish themselves for their sexual curiosity and participating in what is largely viewed as a masculine and “dirty” activity, they were able to appreciate the ways that pornography could enhance their pleasure. As a result, they were able to resist dominant gendered discourses which discourage women from sexual exploration and which suggest that women (should) only experience arousal in the context of heterosexual romance.

Ana (25, Latina, heterosexual, no religion), for example, “loves” viewing amateur pornography online. Instead of feeling guilty for consuming pornography, she says, “Who doesn’t want to watch people having sex? ... I’m going to do what I want to do and I’m going to do me.” Julia (24, white, heterosexual, non-religious) similarly rejects the assumption that pornography is solely a “thing that guys do that’s dirty.” She not only believes that pornography is for women too, but that it is safe way to experience and express one’s sexuality.

Hayley (23, white, heterosexual, no religion) also believes that there are strong positive benefits to women consuming pornography. In contrast to women who feel badly about their bodies and sexuality after viewing pornography, she finds watching pornography to be a self-esteem boost. She says:

There are many women of all shapes and sizes that are proud and flaunting their sexuality and imperfections ... These nameless women ... are not ashamed to show that female pleasure is something that happens and that it is desirable regardless of flaws that may or may not be present.

In this way, Hayley is able to enjoy masturbating and viewing pornography without the negative feelings and emotional conflict that plague many other young women.

***Female Pleasure-Focused Scenarios.*** Another way that young women who were comfortable with masturbation challenged dominant ideas about female desire and pleasure was to view pornography that centers on female, rather than male, pleasure. Rather than view partnered sexual scenarios that did not look as if they would *feel* pleasurable in “real” life, these young women instead pursued scenarios that they could relate to and find pleasurable on an embodied level. Specifically, many heterosexual and bisexual young women preferred to watch two women having sex or a woman masturbating alone over a heterosexual scenario. Michelle (21, white, bisexual, agnostic), for example, finds that “watching two girls have sex together visually stimulates [her] brain and sex drive in a different way” than watching or having sex with men. Even though she does not consider herself to be a lesbian and has “never had a crush on a member of the same sex,” Ava (21, white, heterosexual, no religion) similarly explains that she enjoys watching “girl-on-girl porn” because “there’s something sexy about the female body” that she finds arousing. She says, “It’s not that I want to have sex with another girl. It’s more about watching other people be pleased and me wanting that moment of pleasure as well.” Like Ava, many of these young women find “girl-on-girl” pornography more arousing because they can relate with the physiological sensations the woman appears to be experiencing. According to Gina (19, white, heterosexual, non-religious), “watching a girl get turned on ... helps you ... imagine how they’re feeling and then you’re thinking about that and then it ... turns you on more because you know how they’re feeling.” Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual) similarly

discusses why viewing two women together can be more arousing than viewing a heterosexual scenario:

I feel like they know how to pleasure each other better. So ... if I'm looking at the female body being pleased, I'm feeling like it's my own. So if it's even two girls on each other, I feel like I'm the one getting pleased ... It's not like I'm looking at the guy "oh yeah you're turning me on." I want to see them doing things to girls because that's like "oh, that's me." ... I don't like porn that's ... all about the dick going in. I like when it's more focused on the vagina itself, like getting eaten out ... because I feel like that's more personal and I can understand that more.

For these reasons, even though it violates normative ideals of female sexuality and desire (as phallogentric), many young women prefer viewing pornography that entirely lacks men because they can relate with it on an embodied level.

Heterosexual young women who had not engaged in partnered sex were particularly likely to relate with and enjoy viewing a woman masturbating in contrast with a heterosexual scenario. Jess (19, white, heterosexual, Episcopalian), for example, is aroused by "seeing women masturbating" because "it's what [she's] experiencing." Whereas, it is "not the same" watching sexual activities that she has not experienced (like penile-vaginal intercourse) because she cannot understand how it feels physiologically.

Because many of these women do not assume that penile-vaginal penetration or giving fellatio is physically pleasurable (either because they do not enjoy it or have never experienced it), they do not find such scenarios (which dominate in mainstream heterosexual pornography) physiologically arousing. Instead, they prefer the digital or oral clitoral stimulation often depicted in "girl-on-girl" pornography because these are sexual activities that *feel* pleasurable to them in



“real” life based on the embodied sexual knowledge they possess.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to a number of the heterosexual young women with whom I spoke, whose partnered and solitary masturbation experiences frequently revolve around men’s desires and pleasures (regardless of their own desires and pleasures), these women resist the dominant discourses which suggest that they should always take pleasure in giving men pleasure. Regardless of what men find pleasurable, by viewing pornography that looks physically pleasurable for the female participant(s), these women largely avoid the internal conflicts and subsequent sexual dissatisfaction which many other participants associated with masturbation and pornography consumption.

### **(Semi) Public Masturbation**

Finally, because women for whom masturbation was more normalized felt so confident and comfortable with their masturbation, some even took pleasure in challenging the dominant ideology that female masturbation should be secret or hidden by masturbating in public or semi-public spaces. For instance, Ana’s (25, Latina, heterosexual, no religion) most pleasurable masturbation experiences took place in a library corral, airplane, and public bathroom. She says, “Because no one knows what you’re doing ... I find that very very pleasurable ... I think it’s part of that devious deviant behavior that I find pleasurable.” Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual) also takes pleasure in challenging this erotic taboo covertly in the presence of others. For example, sometimes she masturbates under a blanket on the couch while watching television with friends. Likewise, Julia (24, white,

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<sup>30</sup> LGBTQ or non-identifying women tended to dislike mainstream “girl-on-girl” pornography because they viewed it as a performance for the heterosexual male audience. As a consequence, they preferred to consume explicitly feminist or queer pornography instead.

heterosexual, non-religious) told me in our interview that she could not “think of a situation where [she] would really want to [masturbate] and couldn’t for some reason.” She believes that “women can masturbate a lot more often than they think they can.” Julia explains how easy it is to masturbate in public restrooms, for example, “I’m already in there. My pants are already down, so why not?” Not one to shy away from a masturbation challenge, she also insists that self-stimulating while driving is “doable.” Even though it takes longer than usual for her to reach orgasm because she is “not focusing on the fantasy,” Julia is adamant that masturbating in the car does not “inhibit [her] driving at all.” She explains, “I’m paying attention! I don’t usually drive with two hands anyway ... I’m in such close proximity to the steering wheel that ... I don’t think my reaction time would be slow ... so I drive with my one hand and do what I’m doing!” In contrast to the majority of participants with whom I spoke, who often experienced fear of exposure when masturbating in highly private spaces (e.g. locked bedroom), these young women took pleasure in the possibility of discovery. It is precisely because female masturbation is popularly perceived as “condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence” more than any other sexual behavior (as established in Chapter 4), that engaging in self-stimulation offers girls and young women more power as an act of transgression (Foucault 1976, 6). For this reason, young women like Ana, Chelsea, and Julia enjoy flaunting their violation of repressive cultural norms which dictate that masturbation (in general) is a private and ‘invisible’ sexual activity, and more importantly that women’s sexual desires and pleasures not be visible in the public sphere. Unlike the many girls and young women who restrict their masturbatory behavior and

experience emotional conflict as a result, without the burden of fearing being “outed” as a masturbator, these young women were free not only to pursue self-pleasure (within limits) whenever and wherever they desired and without emotional or physical struggle, but to take pleasure in masturbating as an act of gender rebellion as well.

### **Masturbation as a Tool for Improving Partnered Agency**

In addition to feeling more entitled and comfortable claiming their rights to self-pleasure, young women for whom masturbation was more normalized tended to exhibit a high level of sexual agency and assertiveness in their partnered sexual encounters as well. Because they gradually developed a more positive and comprehensive understanding of their bodies and capacity for pleasure through masturbation, these women felt more comfortable with, and capable of, taking active steps to maximize their experiences of partnered *pleasure*. Possessing the embodied knowledge that they do not necessarily “need” a partner to reap many of the benefits of sex, these women also felt more empowered to take active measures to ensure their sexual *safety*.

### **Masturbation as a Tool for Improving Partnered Pleasure**

The embodied sexual knowledge gained through masturbation helped to make women for whom masturbation was more normalized increasingly more comfortable, confident, and entitled to desire and seek sexual pleasure with others. Because they felt more aware of *how* to experience pleasure on an intellectual and embodied level because of masturbation, these young women felt more comfortable to experience and enjoy pleasure in the presence of a partner. By “practicing”

pleasure on their own, these women were able to learn many of the unknowns (e.g. how to have an orgasm) and mitigate many of the stresses (e.g. that one's partner will be disappointed if they are not good at "giving" pleasure) often associated with less pleasurable early partnered sexual experiences. Finally, the intellectual and embodied sexual knowledge acquired through masturbation imbued many of these women with the confidence and capacity to increase their partnered pleasure by communicating about pleasure with their partners or self-stimulating during partnered sex.

**Getting "In Touch" with Your Body.** Higher overall body image and comfort derived from their masturbation experience helped to increase pleasure experienced during partnered sex. In Carmen's (22, Latina, queer, atheist) case, masturbation helped her to learn to appreciate her body for "what it can do" rather than "how it looks." Hence, she feels more comfortable to "navigate sexual experiences with other people." Because of her masturbation experience, Jamie (21, white, heterosexual, spiritual) also feels more at ease during sex with her boyfriend. She says, "I really can just let myself go and be comfortable with my body and not ... be ashamed of anything." In addition to affecting a young women's overall sense of body image and comfort during sex, experience and comfort engaging in sexual self-touching helped many young women to become more comfortable with someone else stimulating their genitals. As Brittany (21, white, heterosexual, atheist) says, "I know how my body is now, so I know how to receive pleasure." In this way, Brittany suggests that sexual pleasure does not happen automatically, but rather is something one's body needs to learn how to experience. Hence, it appears that it is

only after acquiring this embodied sexual knowledge independently through masturbation that many young women feel competent and comfortable to experience pleasure with a partner.

Learning the mechanics of their sexual bodies and genitalia through masturbation increased women's experiences of partnered pleasure by helping them to understand how and why something feels good. For Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual), for example, who had previously experienced an orgasm "from" her partner, understanding the process and why being touched in particular places and ways felt good significantly increased her sense of pleasure.

I've had [orgasms] with guys before, but I didn't know what they were doing to give it to me. So once I explored myself, I completely understood. Like, "oh, okay, that's how they're doing it." Or "that's where it feels good." ... Even though I had had one, I wouldn't know like how they're doing it, or maybe I wouldn't even know that there was a difference between the clitoral or the vaginal ... I'd still be very confused ... about my own vagina.

Like Chelsea, a number of young women for whom masturbation was more normalized learned through masturbation that they prefer clitoral to vaginal stimulation or that they enjoy a certain amount of clitoral pressure, for example. They are able to apply this knowledge to their partnered interactions in order to experience more pleasure. As Di (27, Chixan@/Mestizo/brown, queer, atheist) says, "If I had waited to learn that from partners it would have taken me forever, and I would probably be frustrated every other time that I had sex because I really would like to orgasm but can't." In this way, masturbation provided Chelsea and Di with a more comprehensive understanding of how their bodies work. This knowledge not only protected them from feeling confused or frustrated about their pleasure (or

lack of) during partnered sexual experiences, but allowed them to experience partnered pleasure on a more embodied level.

**“Practicing” Pleasure.** The process of “practicing” pleasure through masturbation helped to eliminate many of the stresses that often make partnered sex less pleasurable for women. Possessing an embodied understanding of what it means to *feel* desire and pleasure, women who were comfortable with masturbation enjoyed advance knowledge of many of the physiological sensations associated with partnered sex. Initial partnered encounters tended to feel less scary and nerve-wracking as a result. Furthermore, by putting in the effort to teach their bodies to know how to have an orgasm beforehand, achieving pleasure during partnered sex generally did not feel like as much “work” or as “hard” as for young women without significant masturbation experience. Christina (21, Cuban, bisexual, atheist), for example, credits masturbation for her ability to have an orgasm during her first time engaging in sexual intercourse. Given that her partner “didn’t know what he was doing,” she believes that this was only possible because her body already “knew how to have an orgasm.” Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual) similarly feels that if she had never “explored [her] vagina” that she would have never “learned how to have an orgasm.” In addition, for Casey (21, white, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), knowing what she likes and wants always helps to “speed up the process” when she is trying to orgasm during sex.

For young women who engage in sex with other women, masturbation also served as a form of “practice” for how to please a potential partner. As Shreya (22, Indian, bisexual polyamorous, cultural Hindu/Muslim) says, “Being a woman, it

makes it easier to hook up with other women if you know ... your own anatomy.” Consistent with this assertion, LGBTQ women who were comfortable with masturbation were more frequently able to engage in more mutually pleasurable sexual encounters. Rather than starting from a “completely random place,” like Di (27, Chixan@/Mestizo/brown, queer, atheist), young women could use what they do and do not enjoy during masturbation as a starting point for trying to please new female-bodied partners.

For some LGBTQ women, masturbation also served as a mechanism for increasing sexual identity awareness important for the experience of partnered pleasure. Masturbation was a way that they could “privately explore” their attractions and fantasies before engaging in partnered sex. For Piper (21, Native American/white, lesbian), for example, learning what she liked to fantasize about while masturbating “really helped [her] to figure out what [she] liked” sexually. For this reason, some LGBTQ women believe that they would have “come out” earlier, and been able to engage in more pleasurable partnered sex sooner, if they had begun masturbating at an earlier age. Just as masturbation helped many girls and young women who identify as heterosexual to develop a clearer, more embodied understanding of their desires and pleasures, so to did masturbation help some questioning or same-sex attracted young women to affirm their LGBTQ identity.

**Actively Seeking Sexual Pleasure.** Because of the knowledge about pleasure gained from their masturbation experience, many women who were comfortable with masturbation became less dependent on a partner to “give” them sexual pleasure during sex. Instead, some took an active role in facilitating their

partnered pleasure by communicating openly with their partners about what feels good or bad. In addition, some young women sought to further their control over their partnered pleasure by self-stimulating during sex.

***Communicating with Partners About Pleasure.*** Instead of assuming that their partners should innately possess knowledge of how to “please” them, women for whom masturbation was more normalized frequently felt more entitled and confident to communicate what feels good to their partners. Deb (22, Caucasian, Lesbian, Jewish), for instance, says “I am able to say ... ‘this feels a lot better’ and ‘I don’t need this’ or ‘more of this.’” Things like that. So [masturbation’s] definitely helped me to be able to articulate what feels better.” Similarly, Carmen (22, Latina, queer, atheist) says that it is only because she “know[s] [herself] so well” as a result of masturbation that she knows “how to communicate that to other people.” Masturbation experience not only helps young women to communicate what feels good to their partner, but to speak up when sex does *not* feel good. Nikki (19, African-American, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian), for instance, explains “Now I’m at a point where if you’re not pleasing me, I’ll let you know. I’m not going to fake an orgasm. I’m not going to tell you that you did all these things that you didn’t.” Thus, it appears that the embodied sexual knowledge acquired through masturbation provides young women like Nikki with the desire and confidence to aspire to *feel* “sexual” during partnered sex rather than simply appear “sexy” for their partners benefit.

Furthermore, women who are comfortable with masturbation do not view their partner’s inability to “please” them without instructions as indicative of a lack



of sexual prowess or a disappointment. Instead, they expect that they should know their body better than another person, and feel empowered to “help” their partner “give” them pleasure. For example, Elisa (18, white/Mexican, heterosexual, culturally Catholic) writes, “I don’t have a problem with it. I don’t think it’s a deficiency on his part, like ‘oh, you’re not doing it right. This is not good.’ ... Usually my orgasms are better if I help.” Similarly, Camille (27, white, heterosexual, spiritual) provides the following analogy to instructing a partner on how to please her, “You can just have your boyfriend buy you a crappy Christmas present, or you could suggest that you really need a new dress ... That kind of suggestion helps them.” By possessing this non-critical attitude with regard to their partner’s sexual abilities, young women like Elisa and Camille not only avoided much of the pleasure-related internal conflict with which many other young women struggle, but were able to experience more partnered pleasure.

Even young women like Lauren (20, white, heterosexual, Orthodox Jewish), who have not engaged in partnered sex, expect that their masturbation experience will help provide them with important tools for communicating to a future partner about pleasure:

I think I’ve learned something useful for when I actually do have sex and when I do get married, because ... if I don’t know my body, how’s a guy supposed to know that? Seriously. So you’re having sex and you’re like, “Why isn’t this pleasurable? I’m having sex. I’m doing what I’m supposed to do.” ... So I think that would come in handy and I think that’s probably for a healthier sexual relationship when I can actually be like “no, this is what you do.”

The embodied sexual knowledge Lauren has acquired through self-stimulation has helped her to develop a more realistic understanding of sex and pleasure – to

recognize that she need not rely on a future partner to know how to “give” her pleasure because she can rely on herself to communicate or demonstrate what feels good to others.

***Self-Stimulation During Partnered Sex.*** Beyond feeling more comfortable to communicate with their partner about what feels pleasurable, because of their experience engaging in solitary self-stimulation, some women who were comfortable with masturbation took the initiative to self-stimulate during partnered sex to increase their pleasure. Jenny (22, white, pansexual, spiritual), for example, explains how much more comfortable and “in power” she feels to touch herself during partnered sex now that she “know[s] how to be with [her]self”:

This guy I hooked up with two weeks ago, he was fingering me and I started rubbing my clit. And I had never done that before, and I was like, “Alright, that feels good.” I felt like it is something that I will do from now on, because now I’m comfortable with myself, and before I never felt comfortable. Even like grabbing my boobs or any part of my body, before I started masturbating, I wouldn’t do anything like that.

Thus, the embodied experience of masturbation appears to imbue young women like Jenny with the confidence to take control of their partnered sexual satisfaction – to literally take their pleasure into their own hands and self-stimulate.

Some women enjoyed stimulating themselves so much during partnered sex that they were annoyed or aggravated if their partner attempted to interfere with their ability to self-stimulate. Jordan (21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish), for example, explains how “possessive” she has become over her clitoris during partnered sex after discovering masturbation:

I was just like “Oh, I can do that during sex. That’s amazing. That’s super cool.” So now I’m like really possessive of my clitoris. The guys like to do that

thing where they reach around and try to rub it with their thumb ... I'm just like, "Don't touch it. It's mine. I know what to do with it. You just do your thing and I'll do my thing and we'll get to the same place. I don't really need your help ... Just leave my vagina alone."

These women like to be in control of their own pleasure, particularly their orgasm. Michelle (21, white, bisexual, agnostic), for instance, writes about a recent sexual experience with her boyfriend, saying, "I began to rub my clit in swift movements, bringing myself ever so closer to an amazing orgasm. I could start to feel it and I told him not to move and to just let me 'do my thing' until I came." Similarly, Markeshia (21, black, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) finds masturbating during partnered sex "cool because I get to please myself," but complains that her partners "always want to touch and I'm just like, 'Let me have my moment!'" Thus, in contrast to those women who prefer for their partner to "give" them pleasure, young women like Jordan, Michelle, and Markeshia not only initiate masturbation during their partnered sexual interactions in pursuit of their own pleasure, but they actively reject their partners' efforts to take control of that pleasure. They possess a strong sense of ownership over their genitalia and pleasure in the power to give themselves pleasure, which they are not readily willing to hand over.

### **Masturbation as a Tool for Improving Partnered Safety**

In addition to enhancing their partnered agency regarding pleasure, for young women who were comfortable with masturbation, masturbation frequently enhanced their partnered agency regarding safety as well. In many cases, possessing the knowledge that they could masturbate facilitated young women's confidence and motivation to say "no" to partnered sex. In this way, they could primarily engage

in trusting, communicative, emotion-based sexual relationships where they felt “in control” of their bodies, rather than potentially dangerous one-night stands or hook-ups. As a result, they possessed a higher capacity to protect themselves against potential physical and emotional risks of partnered sex in comparison with those young women who did not gradually become more normalized to masturbation.

For many, the knowledge that they can provide themselves with pleasure provided them with more freedom to *not* engage in partnered sex. Some participants’ felt an increased capacity to say “no” and withhold consent for partnered sex with unfamiliar or unreliable partners, to avoid a potentially regrettable, unpleasant, or dangerous one-night stand or a “hook-up” because they knew that they masturbating was an option instead. Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist), for instance, finds it “easier” to decide who or who not to “sleep with” because she knows how to “bring” herself pleasure. Morgan (21, white, heterosexual, atheist) similarly feels that she would have a harder time saying “no” to partnered sex if she did not masturbate, that she “would want to have sex more and then regret it later.” Camille (27, white, heterosexual, spiritual) also believes that masturbation has “postponed” her “first one-night stand.” She says, “I think probably [masturbation] has decreased my desire to be like, ‘oh, I really need to have sex tonight,’ because I knew the majority of what I wanted to get out of having sex with someone that night I can do myself.” Bianca (22, Hispanic, bisexual, non-practicing Catholic) even refers to her vibrator as a “good-decision maker” because it allows her to satisfy her sexual desires without engaging in casual sex. These young women feel “empowered” to say “no” and to *not* need another person to

satisfy their physiological sexual desires. Naomi (21, white, heterosexual, Catholic/agnostic), for instance, says, “If you don’t even have a ‘honey’, you don’t feel the need to go out and find some stranger whenever you’re horny ... You’re fine with it ... It’s no longer a necessity to be sexually fulfilled by another person. You can do it yourself. And that’s empowering.” In this way, masturbation offered some young women an avenue for achieving sexual satisfaction without the risks or stresses often associated with partnered sex.

Some felt this way because stresses associated with the physical risks of engaging in partnered sex, such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, or other vaginal infections (e.g. yeast, urinary tract) took away from their partnered pleasure. Over time, these young women had learned that despite how “good” having partnered sex might feel in the moment, it often was just not “worth” the risk, especially for a meaningless, one-time encounter. After sharing the various struggles and pains she had endured with various contraceptive methods, Ana (25, Latina, heterosexual, no religion), for example, says, “Oh, it was terrible. I far prefer masturbation simply because of this. It’s great at the time. Sex is awesome – until two weeks later when you’re like, ‘God, I hope I’m not pregnant’. You know?” In the process of trying to prevent pregnancy, partnered sex became so medicalized for Ana – so associated with doctor’s visits, prescription medications, and physical and emotional pain – that she opted to forego any contraceptive use. The anxiety associated with now being at higher risk for pregnancy, however, ultimately rendered partnered sex stressful rather than enjoyable. Henceforth, Ana considered

masturbation to be the most physically and emotionally safe avenue for sexual satisfaction.

Fantasizing or viewing pornography during masturbation was one way that women who were comfortable with masturbation could indulge sexual desires that might be impractical or “risky” if acted out in “real” life. Julia (24, white, heterosexual, non-religious), for instance, likes masturbating to pornography because it provides her with a “safe way to experience other things” which she knows might be physically dangerous. She says, “I can’t conceptualize how I would make these things happen under circumstances that I’d feel safe. I’m sure I could make it happen, but in really sketchy ways.” Thus, pornography allowed young women like Julia to explore sexual attractions or desires (e.g. group sex, BDSM) without the risk of STI transmission or violence, for example, or threatening their current romantic relationships.

Some women also felt empowered to avoid partnered sex because of the potential emotional risks associated with it. For example, because she knows she can get what she “needs” from masturbation, Kara (18, white, heterosexual, spiritual) finds it “easier” to say “no” to a potentially emotionally “painful” sexual experience. For her, coming to the realization that she “can do it way better [her]self than in some shallow hooking up experience with some guy” was “huge.” Tasha (22, African-American, “unlabeled” sexual identity, Baptist) similarly finds masturbation to be “a good way to get energy out” without being emotionally “vulnerable.”

Indeed, many participants for whom masturbation was more normalized felt that “having” solitary masturbation made it easier for them to only or primarily

engage in sexual relations with partners with whom they felt an emotional connection. Piper (21, Native American/white, lesbian, atheist), for instance, says “The fact that I can masturbate and please myself affects the fact that I don't have relationships unless they're emotionally based.” Leah (19, white, heterosexual, Jewish) similarly explains how masturbation has provided her with the freedom to only engage in emotionally safe sexual relations with people she trusts:

I never needed to go hook up with random guys and do those kinds of things, I think, because I had masturbation more than other girls. That was their sexual outlet, so I'm glad I had that to do and not be dependent on other people or put myself in certain situations, emotionally, and upset myself, because ... I have a need to trust somebody before I would think about doing anything with them.

Thus, masturbation offered young women like Piper and Leah a viable sexual alternative that did not require them to rely on a partner to achieve sexual satisfaction.

Some of the young women with whom I spoke also indicated that the fact that they enjoy and feel comfortable masturbating makes it easier to feel comfortable being assertive about the extent to which they want to engage in sexual activities with a partner. This often meant an increased capacity to stop sexual activity before it went “too far.” For example, now that Jenny (22, white, pansexual, spiritual) feels comfortable masturbating, she feels “way more comfortable with consent and way more comfortable with ‘No, I only want to make out today. I don't want to do anything else’.” In some cases this allowed young women to avoid engaging in further sexual behaviors with an unwanted partner. Bailey (20, white, heterosexual, atheist), for example, describes how her masturbation experience has

helped her to explore and define her sexual “limits”: “I’ve been out dancing and started kissing a stranger and was like ... ‘I think I’m done.’” And I was able to make that decision, able to walk away ... and it was fine ... There was no huge pressure.” In other cases, masturbation experience helped participants’ to feel more comfortable exercising control over the sexual pace and progression of a new relationship.

Markeshia (21, black, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) explains:

Once you have sex, you know you want it. So, when it’s the first time you’re talking to someone, you don’t want to have sex just because you want it and then ruin something that could actually have a lot of potential. So I would definitely say masturbation has helped because I’ll just do it myself so it doesn’t interfere with anything I have going on with someone that I’m interested in getting to know. I’ll wait until the perfect time where if we do it, it’s not going to affect, because if you do it too soon, it’ll make things weird and uncomfortable.

In this way, Markeshia suggests that masturbation can serve as a mechanism for her to manage her own sexual urges. Engaging in self-pleasure not only allows her to feel more in control of her own body, but more confident to exert power regarding her sexual relations with men.

For these reasons, some women perceived of masturbation as a sexual advantage. Rather than viewing masturbation as a threat to (heterosexual) romance and sex, they conceived of masturbation as a potential tool for enhancing partnered sex and relationships. They believe that the embodied sexual knowledge acquired through masturbation has increased the pleasure they experience during partnered sex, as well as their sense of control over, and safety, in the encounter. Instead of viewing masturbation as a threat to their relationships, they conceive of solitary



masturbation as a normative, and often necessary, companion or precursor to any sexual relationship.

### **Awareness of and Challenging Pleasure Double Standards**

As suggested throughout this chapter, participants who develop an embodied understanding of masturbation as normal and pleasurable over time are also more likely to be aware of pleasure-related gender inequalities and double standards.

They are also more likely to consciously and unconsciously challenge these inequalities through their sexual decisions and actions. Accordingly, they are more likely to express dissatisfaction regarding the current status of female pleasure in U.S. society. For example, the notion that most people readily accept that a woman has never had an orgasm or masturbated “blows” Charlotte’s (18, white, heterosexual, atheist Catholic) mind. She finds it “so disappointing” that people so easily assume that women often do not experience sexual pleasure as much or as frequently as men. Chelsea (22, white, heterosexual, spiritual) similarly believes it is “so wrong” that masturbation is perceived as being more “embarrassing” for girls than for boys. She says, “Guys can fart, they can burp, they can masturbate, they can do whatever the hell they want. They can smell and it’s still okay. But with girls, we’re supposed to be ladies. We’re not supposed to do that kind of stuff.” Chelsea recognizes that despite the many advances made with regard to gender equality in the United States over the past century, that it is still accepted and expected that men *lack* control over their bodies and sexuality, and thus it continues to be considered women’s responsibility to demonstrate their moral restraint through how they present and manage their bodies. As in the past, she realizes girls and

young women who do not meet this feminine ideal may be marked as “deviant” (e.g. as a “slut”) or relegated to a lower social status, while boys and men appear to only gain more power for engaging in the same behaviors.

Women who are comfortable with masturbation are also more likely to conceptualize masturbation as a vital, normative component of female sexuality, and consequently to feel resentful that girls are often denied access to information about and representations of self-pleasure. Bailey (20, white, heterosexual, atheist), for instance thinks it is “unhealthy” and “unfair” that she was never taught about female masturbation in school. Leah (19, white, heterosexual, conservative Jewish) also believes that it is “unfair” to girls for society to take masturbation and make it “sinful and so dirty, dirtier than sex” because “it’s part of growing up and it’s part of sexuality.” While she feels like “a pretty lucky girl” because she learned to masturbate on her own at an early age, she laments the fact that most girls do not gain access to this knowledge or experience:

I think that guys are probably much healthier than girls, growing up with [masturbation], probably because it’s more expected of them ... Whereas girls it’s not expected of, so I think people ... talk more about it with them and they’ll hear about it more ... It’s ... sad that girls don’t have that and guys do.

Like Bailey, Leah resents the existence of a masturbation double standard – that boys possess a cultural “right” to learn about and explore their own bodies and thus develop an embodied sexual subjectivity, while girls are simultaneously denied this freedom.

## **Taking Steps to Challenge Inequalities**

After developing a strong awareness of this pleasure gap and double standard, many women for whom masturbation has become more normalized become more likely to take active steps to challenge these inequalities beyond their individual sexual experiences. Krystal (20, white, bisexual, Christian), for instance, is “baffled” by how common it is for women to “believe something is wrong with them if they cant [sic] achieve orgasm from penetration.” In response, she challenges the “myth of the vaginal orgasm” by advocating to others that women should “have faith in their bodies” and that “the clitoris is ... wonderful and magical” because she believes that “we don’t need any more obstacles in our way that challenge who we are.” In contrast to the majority of participants’ who internalized the notion that female masturbation is a highly private, personal, taboo, and potentially shameful topic, a minority of young women like Krystal actively challenge this idea by publically sharing that masturbation is a normal and positive activity with others. They do this by discussing their masturbation experience with close friends, as well as teaching about the logistics and benefits of masturbating. Some even go so far as to share their masturbation experience and advocate for masturbation on a broader level – informally with female and male peers or in an activist capacity.

**Talking with Others.** Some young women who are comfortable with masturbation challenge the assumption that masturbation is solely a “guy thing” or something that should be “hidden” by talking openly about masturbation with others. Krystal (20, white, heterosexual, atheist), for example, enjoys telling others about her “vibrators which all have names and personalities.” In some cases, talking

about masturbation even serves as a bonding experience for young women. Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish), for instance, “gauges” the quality of her friendships based on their ability to talk about masturbation. She says, “when you’re comfortable enough to talk about that sort of thing, that’s a pretty significant ... level of achievement in terms of friendship ... it [is] ... a really big deal.” Because she values this kind of “honesty,” she consciously seeks out other like-minded young women who enjoy discussing masturbation. Dani (18, black/white, heterosexual, Catholic) similarly found that bringing up the topic of masturbation with her roommates enhanced their closeness. By talking to each other about methods of self-stimulation and how it feels to orgasm, she and her roommates were not only able to feel better about their own bodies and sexuality, but to be content with the knowledge that they have friends with whom they can be completely open and honest without fear of judgment.

**Being the “Go To” Friend.** Participants’ who regularly engage in masturbation without emotional or physical struggle were often the “go to” or “knowledgeable” friend to other young women. In most cases, this meant that they would be the one to bring up the topic of masturbation in conversation. For example, because she believes that masturbation is something that “people should be able to talk about,” Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish) is always the “driver” of conversations about masturbation with her friends. Markeshia (21, black, heterosexual, non-denominational Christian) is similarly known in her social circle as the “open” friend who feels comfortable with and is knowledgeable about masturbation. Young women for whom masturbation was more normalized not only

tend to be comfortable discussing their masturbation experience, but they also often actively advocate masturbation to their female friends. Julia (24, white, heterosexual, non-religious), for instance, took pride in being the “bringer of truth” to her friends about masturbation. Because she discovered masturbation at an early age, she was able to serve as a “great source of knowledge” to friends who did not learn about female sexuality and pleasure on their own or from reliable sources (e.g. parents, school).

Beyond talking to friends about masturbation and pleasure, another way that some young women who were comfortable with masturbation served as a “go to” friend was to bring their friend(s) to a sex store to purchase a vibrator or other pleasure aid. Yana (25, white, heterosexual, culturally Jewish) describes a situation where she brought a friend to the local sex store:

I went with my friend who’d never had a vibrator before, and I was like “oh honey, we need to change this.” Also ... she doesn’t orgasm with men ... so when she told me that I was like, “well, do you masturbate and do you know what is pleasurable for you, so that then you can help him along with it?” And so it came to light that she never had a vibrator, and I was like “oh, we need to go change that.” So we went to Hot and Healthy.

Young women for whom masturbation has been more normalized, like Yana, frequently take pleasure in the shock value of talking about masturbation with sexually innocent or naïve friends, as well as helping their friends to experience better pleasure, whether partnered or alone. Jordan (21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish) was similarly “so excited” to instruct a Mormon (LDS) friend on how to touch her clitoris and to hear about how much “fun” her friend had based on the knowledge she shared. Thus, it appears that for some college women talking

about a taboo topic like female masturbation with female peers may play an important role in the development of their friendships. As college is a formative time in many young women's lives in terms of developing new, often more intense relationships with other women, it is not surprising that masturbation might emerge as an exciting new topic for friends to explore and learn about together precisely because it is something that they likely have not done with anyone else. Even for those young women who did discuss self-pleasure with others before attending college, they have often already learned the value of possessing female peers with whom one can speak openly and honestly about solitary sex, and therefore may consciously seek out this characteristic in potential friends.

**Publically Advocating Female Masturbation.** In addition to advocating masturbation within their close friend circle, a minority of young women who were comfortable with masturbation felt empowered to advocate female masturbation in a more public, widespread manner. They sought to challenge the traditional assumption that women should not be visibly sexual or act entitled to pleasure. For Shanna (20, white, queer, atheist), for instance, her "public relationship" to masturbation changed in college, to where she tried to be a "sex-positive voice" by advocating for and discussing masturbation with others. Feeling "weirdly empowered" for being known as "the lady who knew how everything worked" among her close friends, Julia (24, white, heterosexual, non-religious) also welcomes the opportunity to advocate masturbate publically. She explains that one of the main reasons she is such a strong advocate of openly discussing female masturbation is

because she wants to challenge the assumption that masturbation is solely a “guy thing”:

Because it's something that people always think of guys doing it and never think of women doing it ... I'm probably even more like over the top about it than it really is. I probably don't do it as often or as crazily as I talk about, but I'm making that point ... If pornography comes up, I'll totally be like, “I do it all the time. Why? Because I masturbate all the time!” ... So any discussions about pornography or masturbation, I'm usually very open in telling people I do it and often ... I don't want guys to think they have some universal claim on masturbation ... so ... I talk to guys about how women masturbate all the time or how much cooler it is to be a woman and masturbate than be a guy ... I like to be open and honest about that, because I think that not many people are.

Like Julia, sometimes Jordan (21, white, straight/lesbian, culturally Jewish) goes “over the top” with her masturbation advocacy to make a point and challenge dominant traditional conceptions of female masturbation. She actively resists the social construction of masturbation as sinful and “wrong” by publically vocalizing her masturbation enthusiasm to the anti-masturbation religious individuals who regularly preach on her campus. She says, “When the guy stands out there, he's got the ... [anti-masturbation] sign and I'm like, ‘I fucking love masturbating. Yeah! I'm going to masturbate right now. I'm actually masturbating in front of you at this very moment.’ ... He just gets so infuriated. It makes me so happy.”

### **Conclusion**

Previous chapters have illuminated how female masturbation can operate as a tool of gender oppression which constrains, rather than expands, women's experience of sexual agency and subjectivity. In contrast, the narratives presented in this chapter demonstrate how female masturbation can also operate as a tool of gender resistance and liberation. When girls and young women are provided with

information and resources for learning about and making meaning of masturbation, over time they can gradually deconstruct internalized negative ideologies about gender and pleasure. In turn, with significant independent pleasure “practice,” they can internalize positive, more factually accurate ideas about female sexuality. As a result, these young women possess a higher capacity to critically evaluate, and consequently resist, hegemonic sexuality discourses. Rather than subject to emotionally and physically painful masturbatory self-disciplining, they are free to seek out and experience pleasure (whether alone or with a partner) on their own terms.

These narratives also illustrate how normalizing female masturbation can have positive material implications for young women’s experiences of sexual subjectivity, pleasure, and health. When provided with information and representations to draw on to make meaning of their own solitary sexual desires and experiences (such as the examples provided in the previous chapter), girls and young women possess an increased capacity to develop an embodied sexual subjectivity. They are more likely to experience “embodied desire” (Lamb 2010), and more able to gain access to a critical “tool” of masturbation: the sexual embodied sexual knowledge that can only be acquired through the pursuit of self-pleasure. When masturbation is linked to other significant social experiences for girls, like it often is for boys, it can become integrated into later patterns of individual and social behavior in a more organic manner (Gagnon and Simon 2005). With this embodied sexual knowledge, girls are able to become more proactive about sexual pleasure. The sexual experience acquired through masturbation



provides young women with the know-how and perspective to more critically evaluate their independent and partnered sexual interactions, to realize that feeling pleasure does not have to be “hard” or a lot of “work,” that it should not be physically or emotionally painful, and finally, that sometimes a young woman must take her pleasure into her own hands.

Providing girls and young women with access to information and representations that facilitate the development of an embodied sexual subjectivity may help to level the sexual playing field, so to speak. Solitary masturbation provides an avenue for girls and young women to gain a comfort with their sexual bodies, and learn their capacity for orgasmic pleasure in a way which they are unlikely to experience in early sexual encounters where both parties lack significant sexual experience and knowledge (about female genital anatomy and pleasure in particular). So instead of initially learning about their sexuality through partnered sexual interactions, by developing an independent understanding of their sexual bodies over time through masturbation *before* engaging in partnered sex (as boys generally do), girls would no longer conceptualize their sexuality primarily in terms of male desires and pleasures. As girls’ ability to make more informed and self-oriented (rather than Other-oriented) sexual choices increases, boys would be less likely to possess a sexual advantage in these encounters.

These interactions could promote more gender egalitarianism and mutual pleasure in sexual relationships, and the degree of risk involved in these relationships would likely reduce as well. For example, because masturbation satisfies young women’s physiological sexual urges, it not only provides her the

opportunity to develop a sense of comfort and confidence with her sexual body and to learn “how” to experience orgasmic pleasure, but it also potentially offers her the freedom and patience to “wait” and only engage in sexual relations with partners with whom she feels safe. So while normalizing masturbation for girls may not prevent them from engaging in partnered sex altogether, it may increase the likelihood that they engage in sexual relations with fewer partners, in the context of more trusting, communicative, and egalitarian relationships, and after they have gained significant knowledge and confidence about their sexual bodies and the experience of pleasure.

In this way, the relationship between girls possessing the “freedom to” know and experience sexual pleasure and “freedom from” sexual pain or harm becomes apparent. It is clear how *not* developing a sense of embodied sexual subjectivity “may put girls in danger and ‘at risk’” and why “being able to feel one’s own sexual feelings, resisting objectifying sex and oneself, and feeling entitled to sexual experiences and pleasure, including self-pleasure, without guilt” are essential components for adolescent female sexual health (Tolman 2002, 21; Tolman, Striepe, and Harmon 2003, 8). In addition to the internal psychological and developmental health benefits of developing an embodied sexual subjectivity, it is apparent how young women with “self-respecting sexual identities” are in a “stronger position to promote sexual safety” (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1992, 5). Hence, increasing girls’ and young women’s access to positive discourses on female masturbation that may facilitate their acquiring of this essential embodied knowledge appears to have

significant potential to reduce the incidence of a variety of physical and social health issues, such as unplanned pregnancy, STI transmission, or sexual assault.

In addition, rather than perpetuate gender inequalities through their sexual feelings and behaviors, young women who have gradually become more normalized to masturbation on an intellectual and an embodied level often possess a higher propensity for resisting gender inequalities through their solitary and partnered sexual desires and behaviors. For example, previous chapters have illustrated the impact of the “myth of the vaginal orgasm” – the misconception that orgasm from internal, vaginal-penile stimulation alone is the “best” and most common form of female orgasm – has on many young women’s sexual experiences. Young women for whom masturbation has become more normalized, however, often challenge this culturally accepted myth by embracing, rather than resenting, the power they possess to “give” pleasure to themselves through clitoral stimulation (whether alone or with a partner).

Normalizing female masturbation may not only positively affect young women’s potential to resist hegemonic sexuality discourses in solitary and partnered sexual activities, but extend to other realms as well. As long as men are perceived as possessing knowledge and power over sex and pleasure, the conception that men have, and should have, power over women in other domains will persist. Providing representations and forums for girls to learn and talk about their bodies and possibilities for (self-) pleasure is not only imperative for enacting individual-level material changes to improve the lives of women and girls, but for challenging broader societal gender inequalities as well. Girls and young women

who develop the comfort to speak out about such a “taboo” topic as female masturbation are likely to also feel comfortable advocating for other important social issues on which women have been silenced. They may also be more likely to challenge hegemonic gender norms in other aspects of their private and public lives (e.g. in the workplace). Thus, arming girls and young women with the awareness and motivation to break the silence about a pleasure gap or struggle visible in their own lives in small ways with close friends or partners is an important first step to developing an understanding of these struggles as not just an individual problem, but as a result of larger structural societal inequalities.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **CONCLUSION**

The primary goal of this project was to interrogate how internalized gender and sexuality discourses affect young women's embodied experiences of self-pleasure. My findings indicate that when girls internalize negative discourses about masturbation (e.g. as sin or secular stigma), general heteronormative sexuality discourses, and a silence around female self-pleasure, there are severe negative consequences for how they come to understand and experience solitary sex. The findings indicate that most girls and young women engage in some degree of self-monitoring, policing, and regulating of their most private, internal sexual desires and feelings, as well their solitary sexual behavior. This self-surveillance often results in emotional and physical struggles, as well as the re-inscription of hegemonic cultural discourses on female masturbation, bodies, desire, and pleasure. My findings indicate that only a small minority of girls are exposed to potentially normalizing information, representations, and experiences through early sources of socialization (e.g. parents, schools). My data suggest that the rest do not gain access to alternative discourses about female sexuality and pleasure that help them deconstruct and challenge these deeply instilled negative sexuality ideologies until late high school or college, if at all. After repeated exposure to positive discourses, however, many young women are able to develop an increased capacity to resist dominant gender and sexuality discourses, and understand and experience solitary and partnered sex on an embodied level as empowering and (emotionally and

physically) pleasurable, rather than oppressive and (emotionally and physically) painful.

In this chapter I consider both the theoretical and practical implications of this research. First, I explain how my findings contribute to existing knowledge and theorizing about female self-pleasure, subjectivity, and health. Then, I consider some practical applications of these findings, and propose some strategies for breaking the silence around female (self-) pleasure. Finally, I reflect on possible avenues for further inquiry in this research area.

### **Theoretical Implications**

In this section I consider the major theoretical implications of this research. I show how my findings relate to existing knowledge on female self-pleasure, sexual subjectivity, and health, as well as the relationship between gender, sexuality, and power more generally.

### **Girls' and Young Women's Lived Experiences of Masturbation**

By analyzing young women's own narratives about their lived experiences of self-pleasure, this research fills a large gap in research on female masturbation. Not only is this the largest-scale study to directly ask women about their masturbatory feelings and experiences since Shere Hite's (1976) groundbreaking research almost 40 years ago, but this is also the largest study ever to situate female masturbation as the focal point of inquiry and analysis from its inception. Hence, this data portrays a diversity of meanings, motivations, and experiences associated with engaging in self-stimulation for girls and young women largely not represented in existing (primarily quantitative) research.

Consistent with past large-scale studies (Herbenick et al. 2009; Hite 1976; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard 1953; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994; Masters and Johnson 1966), my research shows that the majority of young women do masturbate. Unlike these studies, however, my research illuminates the complexities and conflicts associated with the pursuit of self-pleasure for many girls and young women – that the struggle *to* masturbate, for example, can be as arduous and painful as the struggle *to not* masturbate or that masturbation can function and be experienced as both “liberating” and “oppressive.”

In contrast to much of the existing research on female sexuality that underscores sexual differences between social groups and thus perpetuates social hierarchies, my research emphasizes the many *commonalities* in girls’ and young women’s perspectives and experiences of masturbation across racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual identity lines. My findings suggest that individuals from diverse backgrounds are socialized into many of the same discourses about sexuality and pleasure, and share many of the perceived benefits (e.g. relaxation, sense of bodily control) and struggles (e.g. difficulty achieving orgasm, emotional conflict) associated with masturbation. While it is often assumed that religiously observant girls and young women lack sexual desire or experience (or at the very least that they would be unwilling to talk about it), my research demonstrates that many *do* in fact feel sexual desire, and do masturbate (and are willing to talk about it). Furthermore, while previous research suggests that lesbian women often experience more frequent orgasms and higher levels of sexual satisfaction during masturbation and partnered sex in contrast with heterosexual women (Bressler and

Lavender 1986; Coleman, Hoon, and Hoon 1983; Fahs and Swank 2013; Iasenza 2002; Schreurs and Buunk 1996), this research suggests that LGBTQ young women experience many of the same sexual struggles as heterosexual young women, such as the pressure to orgasm (and sometimes “fake it”) whether with a partner or alone.

On the other hand, my research also illuminates the extent to which the meaning(s) and experience(s) of female masturbation are highly context-dependent. For instance, while my research shows, consistent with the scant existing research, that young women from a broad array of religious backgrounds engage in and enjoy masturbation, it also shows that those belonging to particularly conservative and sexually prohibitive faiths tend to experience significantly more severe sexuality and masturbation struggles than other young women (Malan and Bullough 2005). My findings also suggest that the potential benefits associated with self-stimulation may be more extensive and significant for LGBTQ youth than for others. Not only does my data suggest that masturbation may function as a mechanism for “testing” sexual attraction before engaging in partnered sex, but it also appears to serve as a tool for learning how to better sexually satisfy a potential same-sex partner. These findings challenge the popular assumption that lesbians automatically have more pleasurable sex than heterosexual women because they possess the same genital anatomy. What most people do not consider is that if girls (regardless of sexual identity) do *not* gain knowledge, familiarity, and comfort with their own sexual anatomy, they are not equipped to pleasure themselves, let alone a female partner. As with heterosexual girls and young women, it often takes many years of partnered



(and independent) sexual “practice” before LGBTQ women are able to have “good” sex. Finally, because educational and social experiences associated with attending college were often primary sources for exposure to potentially normalizing information, discourses, and experiences with regard to female sexuality and (self-) pleasure, my research also suggests that socioeconomic and educational status may play a large role in how and when women come to understand and experience self-pleasure.

**Female Self-Pleasure and Pornography.** While there is a large pool of research on the “effects” of pornography consumption on men, such as whether it causes physical aggression or misogynistic attitudes towards women, virtually no research exists on women’s roles as active consumers of pornography (Attwood 2005). This research, however, establishes that many girls and young women do view pornography as a part of their solitary sexual experiences. What is more, in contrast to the bulk of research that focuses on how men’s consumption of mainstream pornography is oppressive to women (see Attwood, 2005 for overview), this research illuminates some of the ways that consuming mainstream pornography before or during self-stimulation may serve as a form of gender resistance for girls and young women, by helping them gain access to intellectual and embodied sexual knowledge and pleasure without the physical or emotional risks of partnered sex.

### **Missing Discourse of Female Self-Pleasure**

This research also establishes that there is a missing discourse of female self-pleasure in U.S. society. These findings are consistent with existing research on a

more general “missing discourse of desire” for girls in schools (Fields 2008; Fine 1988; Fine and McClelland 2006). This finding also provides further evidence to support the fact that most parents are uncomfortable discussing pleasure, and self-pleasure in particular, with their daughters, and avoid such discussions (Elliott 2012; Lamb 2001). What is more, despite the successful infusion of sex toys and many aspects of the sex industry into mainstream culture, and the perceived power of the active and aggressive sexual female, my research participants indicate that representations and discussions of female masturbation are largely absent from the media and popular culture, as well as interactions with peers. Thus, my findings are consistent with recent research on postfeminist media discourse which suggests that it is the performance, rather than experience, of a certain kind of sexual knowledge, practice, and agency which is represented as empowering to girls and young women (Gill 2007a; Gill 2007b; Lazar 2006). It appears that the postmodern “sex as self-pleasure” ethic that has permeated U.S. culture in recent years – cultivating the widespread construction of a pleasurable “autosexuality” where sex is no longer seen as necessarily tied to kinship or reproduction – in reality only applies to girls and young women insofar as it serves to recuperate hegemonic gender and sexuality norms (Attwood 2006, 87). While postfeminist and neoliberal rhetoric often valorizes individualism and choice, it seems that women actually self-pleasuring – satisfying themselves sexually through masturbation – is still considered so threatening to traditional ideals of femininity and masculinity that it continues to be policed and disciplined through a variety of discursive mechanisms. It is only by revealing the cultural instruments that underlie this regulation that this

masturbation double standard can ultimately be exposed, and the silence around female self-pleasure finally broken.

In contrast to my previous research with Breanne Fahs (Fahs and Frank 2014), where we argue that such discursive silences can offer adult women the freedom to develop their own script for masturbation, my findings indicate that this is largely not the case for girls and young women. Instead, my research shows that girls' understandings of what it means for a girl to talk about or engage in masturbation are primarily influenced by the minimal, yet dominant, discourses which frame female masturbation as highly taboo and stigmatized, and which depict masturbation in general as sinful. Consistent with my previous research with Fahs, however, this research demonstrates how in the absence of many explicit (positive or negative) discourses on self-pleasure, girls and young women tend to fill in the gaps in their masturbation knowledge by drawing on patriarchal ideologies embedded in dominant heteronormative discourses (e.g. virgin/whore dichotomy, cult of female purity, pleasure imperative). It appears that it is not until later in life, if at all, that many women are exposed to enough alternative and accurate messages regarding female sexuality and pleasure that they are able to emotionally and physically challenge deeply internalized hegemonic sexuality discourses. It is also likely that the body knowledge and comfort many women may acquire through engaging in sexual activity (whether alone or with others) over time may help them to eventually develop the know-how and confidence to resist dominant discourses regarding self-pleasure. In contrast, constantly inundated with prohibitive and heteronormative messages about female sexuality, lacking access to accurate

information about female bodies and pleasure, and lacking time to develop extensive embodied sexual knowledge, girls and young women are often denied access to the tools needed to critically interpret and resist dominant and missing discourses around (self-) pleasure.

Therefore, this research sheds new light on the power of discursive silences to deeply instill traditional ideologies about female sexuality and pleasure in girls and young women. My findings illuminate how the significant discourse on boys' sexuality and pleasure and the relative absence of a discourse on girls' sexuality and pleasure results in the internalization and acceptance of sexual double standards and other sexual inequalities. My data on how young women raised within conservative religious communities where explicit discourses on male sexuality are particularly prevalent and those on female sexuality strikingly absent, for example, demonstrates the relationship between the size of the discursive gap between male and female sexuality and the extent to which negative beliefs about female sexuality and pleasure are internalized.

In this way, the research contributes to an understanding of the consequences of such gender disparities in available sexuality discourses for the perpetuation of gender and sexuality inequalities on a broader societal level. For example, the absence of a discourse around female self-pleasure contributes to the silence around clitoral pleasure and orgasm. Rooted in psychosexual theories about the development of 'normal' feminine sexuality, this absence contributes to the valorization of the vaginal orgasm. Based on the Freudian notion that the clitoris should hand over sensitivity and importance to the vagina as a young woman

matures, the penis is continually constructed as central to the achievement of female sexual pleasure (Freud 1965). As a result, not only are young women socialized to become sexually reliant on men, but their bodies are essentially set up to “fail,” given that many women cannot experience orgasm through vaginal penetration alone. Moreover, the presence of a discourse on masturbation for men, but not for women, regularizes masturbation as a topic of discussion and sexual behavior for men (Gagnon and Simon 2005), while denying girls and young women access to a sexual script for talking about or engaging in masturbation. This *discourse gap* strengthens the notion that sexuality is a site solely of male power. With the penis positioned as the center of the sexual universe, reproduction and male pleasure are continually situated as the sole objectives of sex. This reinforces the existence of a double standard that demands that women be sexually passive and morally innocent, yet bear responsibility for the consequences of sex. Accordingly, this good girl/bad girl dichotomy dictates that young women who are “overly” sexual, not sexual “enough,” or simply not the “right” kind of sexual, may be marked as deviant. Either way women are placed in a double bind.

### **Intensification of Sexual Self-Surveillance**

As “solitary” sex, masturbation has generally been thought to be “invisible” and thus not subject to external regulation (Laqueur 2003). Yet, my research demonstrates that female masturbation is in fact highly susceptible to regulatory discursive mechanisms. This regulation occurs not through overt mechanisms (e.g. legal or health systems), but through the internalization of traditional ideologies embedded in dominant cultural discourses and silences that serve as a guide for

self-management. As a result, girls and young women often monitor and police their sexual feelings and private, independent sexual behaviors, female masturbation is appropriated as a tool of social control, and external regulation becomes unnecessary. In this way, “efforts to control sexuality from within ... might be regarded as the modern alternative to older forms of communal, religious, judicial, and political control” (270). Ultimately, by illustrating how even the most private and ‘invisible’ behavior of masturbation can become a site for regulating female sexuality, this research highlights the power of increasingly covert mechanisms to govern gendered bodies and subjectivities through self-surveillance (Foucault 1976).

By illuminating some of the ways that both *present* and *absent* discourses affect how young women experience their sexual minds and bodies, this research contributes to theoretical understandings of the relationship between the discursive and the material. These findings serve as evidence of the power of the media industry, for example, to control individual bodies and perpetuate inequalities through what they choose to or choose not to represent through various cultural texts (e.g. television, film, magazines). In this way, consistent with existing feminist research on eating disorders (Bordo 1993) and dieting (Brumberg 1997), this research shows how young female bodies have increasingly become “projects” and thus a site of social control and struggle. Rather than symbolizing a new bodily freedom, masturbation, like dieting, suggests the necessity of greater “internal control of the body” (98). Like female hunger, the social control of female desire and behavior through masturbation is a “discipline” that serves to educate female bodies

about their possibilities and limitations, serving as a form of bodily resistance and oppression (Bordo 1993, 130).

Therefore, this research shows that many of the same unequal power relations are at play today as in the past, that girls and young women are not as sexually “empowered” or “liberated” as popular representations might suggest. Similar to recent scholarship on “raunch feminism” and public female performances of “active, confident ... sexuality” such as participating in pole-dancing exercise classes or purchasing a Brazilian bikini wax (Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Thompson 1998; Levy 2005), this research shows how hegemonic gender and sexuality norms are also often reinscribed through female masturbation – a behavior generally assumed to be automatically sexually “liberating.” Not only do many girls and young women not *feel* “empowered” or “in control” of their bodies when they masturbate, but they often experience many of the same sexual insecurities and pressures felt during partnered sex (e.g. to orgasm through vaginal penetration) during independent self-stimulation. Thus, these findings also extend our theoretical understanding of a female “pleasure imperative” by illustrating how such heteronormative discourses are so pervasive that they not only affect girls’ and young women’s experiences of partnered sexuality (Allen 2012; Fahs 2011a; Tiefer 2004), but their solitary sexual activities as well. What is more, this data contradicts previous research which suggests engaging in masturbation or using a vibrator necessarily indicates that a woman is comfortable with her genitalia and feels more “in control” of her body (Herbenick et al. 2009). In this way, this research communicates the importance of

understanding that the consequences of various gender and sexual inequalities on girls' and young women's lived experiences of desire and pleasure are *not* limited to their partnered interactions, but deeply effect their capacity to feel and act as independent sexual beings as well.

Much of the recent scholarly discourse around what it means for girls and young women to exercise and experience sexual empowerment has revolved around the concern of labeling an activity or behavior that is generally considered to reinforce patriarchal gender norms, such as pole-dancing or obtaining breast implants, as empowering simply because it *feels* empowering to individual girls and young women (Lamb 2010). In accordance with feminist researchers who have considered some of the potential dangers of formulating a new pleasure mandate for girls and young women (Allen 2012; Lamb 2010; Peterson and Lamb 2012), however, my research indicates the importance of attending to the possibility that engaging in a behavior or practice which in theory poses a challenge to hegemonic gender norms, such as female masturbation, may not necessarily *feel* empowering to some girls and young women. Thus, the findings of this research highlight the necessity of contextualizing individual girls' and young women's feelings and perceptions of sexual empowerment within broader cultural discourses, and suggests that we cannot simply categorize a particular young women as "sexually empowered" or scenario as "sexually empowering," nor understand what it means for girls and young women to exercise or experience sexual empowerment without acknowledging and considering multiple factors, including their subjectivities.



This research supports Rosalind Gill's (2007b) argument that "postfeminist" empowerment rhetoric only serves to mask the increasingly subversive ways that gender and sexual inequality continue to be perpetuated. In some ways, the fact that girls and young women's bodies and sexual subjectivities are now primarily governed through an intensification of sexual self-surveillance is even more dangerous, as the hidden nature of this regulation facilitates the continued invisibility of hegemonic sexuality discourses and power structures. Maintaining this invisibility helps to ensure that male (hetero)sexual power and privilege remains unidentified and unquestioned, and this limits our abilities to actively challenge these social dynamics.

### **Importance of (Self-) Pleasure to Girls' and Women's Sexual Health**

This research also contributes to our theoretical understanding of the importance of pleasure and the development of an agentic sexual subjectivity to girls' and young women's sexual health. My findings indicate that masturbation provides girls with important embodied sexual knowledge and experience crucial for developing their sexual subjectivity and *feeling* sexually agentic in both solitary and partnered sexual interactions. Moreover, in contrast to previous research on women and masturbation frequency and prevalence which suggests that girls and women who masturbate are at a higher risk for promiscuity and contracting HIV (Coleman, Hoon, and Hoon 1983; Das 2007; Gerressu et al. 2008; Herold and Way 1983; Davidson and Moore 1994; Robinson, Bockting, and Harrell 2002; Træen, Stigum, and Sørensen 2002; Pinkerton, Bogart, Cecil, and Abramson 2013), my open-ended research on perspectives, feelings, and experiences related to female

masturbation demonstrates that girls and young women who experience and enjoy self-stimulation on an embodied level may in fact be less likely to engage in promiscuous sexual behaviors and actually have a reduced risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections or becoming pregnant.

**Masturbation as a Tool for Facilitating Partnered Sexual Agency.** This research indicates that masturbation serves as an important tool for facilitating girls' and young women's development of embodied sexual knowledge and a sexual subjectivity that may facilitate their capacity for and experience of sexual agency with a partner as well as alone. My research establishes the importance of the embodied experience of masturbation – that is, masturbation that feels both emotionally and physically comfortable and pleasurable – for the development of an increased confidence and motivation to exercise sexual agency with a partner for girls and young women. Not only do such young women feel more comfortable to experience and enjoy pleasure with a partner (because they already know what it means to feel pleasure), but the embodied sexual knowledge gained through masturbation helps make pleasure with a partner feel “easier” and less stressful to achieve. What is more, these young women also possess more confidence and take more pleasure in actively seeking pleasure during partnered sex; they are more likely to communicate to a partner about what feels good or bad or to literally take their pleasure into their own hands by engaging in self-stimulation.

My research demonstrates the importance of the embodied experience of self-pleasure for increasing a given girl or young woman's capacity to exercise sexual agency with regard to safety as well as pleasure. Not only do such young

women often possess a stronger sense of empowerment and entitlement to “just say no” to unwanted or potentially “risky” partnered sex, but they tend to feel more “in control” of the sexual interactions in which they do choose to engage. My research shows how those girls and young women who do experience self-pleasure on an embodied level may possess more freedom to manage and quench their sexual desires while avoiding unnecessary physical or emotional risks often associated with partnered sex.

**Masturbation as a Tool for Facilitating Awareness of Inequalities.** My research also suggests the importance of girls and young women developing an agentic sexual subjectivity through masturbation for both increasing their awareness of gender and sexual inequalities and their commitment to challenge those inequalities on a personal and societal level. My findings indicate that the embodied sexual knowledge gained through masturbation provides girls with a more realistic understanding and appreciation for their bodies and sexuality that facilitates their awareness of and dissatisfaction with pleasure-related gender inequalities and double standards (e.g. the “myth of the vaginal orgasm”). My research demonstrates how these girls start to challenge many of these inequalities through their experiences of self-pleasure, by engaging in masturbation when, where, and how it feels comfortable and enjoyable, even if their behavior does not align with dominant hegemonic social norms for female sexual desire and behavior. My findings suggest that the embodied experience of masturbation helps girls to develop a sexual subjectivity that may imbue them with the knowledge and

confidence to recognize, speak out about, and resist gender and sexuality-related inequalities on a broader level as well.

**Importance of Embodiment to the Experience of Sexual Agency.** This research also contributes to broader theoretical understandings of sexual agency and subjectivity, and the important role that embodiment plays in their development and experience. This research demonstrates that there is an important distinction between possessing the *capacity* to exert agency, the *exercise* of sexual agency, and *feeling* sexually agentic. My findings illuminate how the exercise and experience of sexual agency is in reality a multi-step process that requires girls and young women to acquire and develop not only intellectual sexual knowledge, but an embodied sense of desire, pleasure, and entitlement. That is, to experience desire and pleasure as connected to (rather than alienated from) bodily sensations, to experience one's body as not just "sexy," but as "sexual," and to possess a bodily sexual awareness and sense of entitlement which can only be acquired through experience (e.g. how it feels to orgasm).

My research indicates that possessing intellectual sexual knowledge and a desire to experience pleasure and then taking action to implement that knowledge and fulfill that desire is not necessarily sufficient for girls and young women to *feel* sexually agentic. Rather, consistent with feminist research which emphasizes the importance of embodiment to girls' experiences of sexual subjectivity (Martin 1996; Tolman 2002), my data suggests that to really *feel* "in control" of their bodies and wholly enjoy sexual pleasure, girls need to "know" or "learn" to feel pleasure, and to develop a sense of entitlement to that pleasure over time. My findings illuminate

how much many girls and young women struggle to enact these various aspects of sexually agency and to *feel* sexually agentic. More specifically, my analysis illustrates how sexual agency, embodiment, and pleasure are relational co-constitutive processes that are rarely, if ever, absolutely enabled or disabled, experienced or denied. Neither easy nor automatic, they often require significant practice.

Based on my findings, the first step in this process for most girls is to gain access to factual information about female sexuality and pleasure. My data suggests that dynamic visual representations play a particularly important role in encouraging girls to make connections between abstract information and their own bodies and experiences. The next step for most girls is to engage with this intellectual knowledge in experiential ways, by talking with others or visiting a sex store, for example. Third, girls must possess the desire to take sexual action and develop the emotional comfort and confidence to take action. Even once they have taken sexual action, girls must develop the emotional comfort and confidence to enjoy the sexual activity. Then, most girls need to engage in sexual “practice” in order to develop the embodied sexual knowledge necessary to experience physical sexual pleasure. Finally, even once taking sexual action feels emotionally and physically comfortable and pleasurable, many girls still need to develop a sense of entitlement to that pleasure to experience it as wholly enjoyable and empowering.

**Relationship Between Pleasure, Sexual Subjectivity, and Health.** In this way, my research provides an important contribution to research on the relationship between pleasure, sexual subjectivity, and health. My research shows how girls and young women who are provided with opportunities to learn about

and make meaning of their independent sexual desires and behaviors on an intellectual and embodied level possess an increased capacity to develop an agentic sexual subjectivity. By experiencing “embodied desire” and pleasure as related to masturbation (Lamb 2010), girls and young women are able to gain access to embodied sexual knowledge difficult to obtain through other means. Moreover, my research suggests some of the benefits of girls and young women learning about and developing a relationship with their sexual bodies independently and gradually through masturbation *before* engaging in partnered sex. My research demonstrates how the bodily comfort and sexual knowledge gained through the pursuit and experience of self-pleasure may empower girls and young women to become more proactive about sexual pleasure in general, as well as help to socialize them to conceptualize pleasure in terms of their own desires and pleasures rather than solely men’s. Due to this increased capacity for girls and young women to make informed and self-oriented sexual choices, the disproportionate power boys and young men generally wield in early sexual encounters would be significantly reduced. My findings show the potential for these interactions to become more gender egalitarian by both increasing pleasure and reducing emotional and physical risks.

Hence, this research demonstrates the importance of conceptualizing girls’ and young women’s sexual health within a positive rights framework. While it is essential that girls and young women possess the right to engage in sex free from sexual coercion, pain, or harm, this “negative” right is not enough. Consistent with previous research on the relationship between girls’ sexual subjectivity and health,

my research shows how, without access to embodied sexual pleasure knowledge and experience, girls may be more “in danger” and “at risk” (Tolman 2002, 21). My findings show how the inability to experience sexual desire and solitary pleasure without emotional conflict, to feel deserving of sexual pleasure (whether partnered or alone), and to resist hegemonic gender and sexuality discourses have significant consequences for girls’ and young women’s capacity to *feel* in control of their sexual minds and bodies. In agreement with Tolman, Striepe, and Harmon’s (2003) research on adolescent girls’ sexual subjectivity and health, my research suggests that there is an important relationship between the capacity to know about, feel, experience, and feel entitled to embodied desire and pleasure and what it means for girls and young women to be and feel sexually “healthy.” What is more, similar to Holland and Ramazanoglu’s (1992) research on the relationship between sexual pleasure and engaging in safer sex, my research illustrates how masturbation may function as a tool for facilitating the development of an embodied sexual subjectivity which may in turn imbue girls and young women with the knowledge, motivation, and confidence to speak up and “promote sexual safety” in their partnered sexual encounters (5).

### **Practical Implications**

Recognizing the relationship between the embodied experience of solitary pleasure and partnered pleasure and safety has important practical implications for how we understand girls’ and young women’s sexual health. Instead of automatically excluding discussions or representations of female pleasure from the sex education classroom and other venues for fear that it will encourage girls to

engage in potentially dangerous sexual behaviors, my research suggests that parents, educators, healthcare professionals, and policy-makers should think more critically about how arming girls with the tools they need to acquire intellectual and embodied knowledge about pleasure might *enhance* girls sexual health and actually *reduce* potential sexual risks.

First, they should consider how bodily knowledge gained through self-pleasure might facilitate girls' comfort and motivation to take active steps to ensure their independent sexual health. Previous research on female sex toy use, for example, has shown that female vibrator users are more likely to engage in positive sexual health behaviors, such as regularly having a gynecological exam and performing genital self-exams (Herbenick et al. 2009). My findings are consistent with this research, as I illustrate how the bodily knowledge and comfort girls and young women often gain through masturbation provides them with a more accurate and realistic understanding of their bodies possibilities and limits. They are able to teach their bodies to recognize "healthy" levels of pleasure and pain. Thus, my research suggests that such girls and young women would possess a higher awareness of what their body looks and feels like when it is sexually "healthy," and therefore a higher capacity to notice when something is wrong (e.g. a breast lump or genital wart) or painful (e.g. a urinary tract infection) and a higher degree of comfort to seek out a medical opinion in a timely manner.

Second, parents, educators, healthcare professionals, and policy-makers need to more closely examine the potential benefits of talking about pleasure with girls for minimizing many of the emotional and physical, public health risks of youth



engaging in partnered sex. As my research shows, young women who eventually developed an embodied understanding of self-pleasure tended to feel more “in control” of their sexual bodies in general. They often felt more comfortable to say “no” to sex with unwanted partners or in undesirable situations, and thus to opt out of participation in one-night stands or “hook-up” culture. Given the research which suggests that “hook-up” culture is highly biased towards young men’s emotional and physical desires and pleasures (Bogle 2008), it would seem that any mechanism for reducing the emotional and physical risks of engaging in such behaviors for girls would be beneficial. Furthermore, consistent with Holland and Ramazonglu’s (1992) research which indicates that young women with “self-respecting sexual identities” may be in a “stronger position to promote sexual safety” (5), my findings suggest that girls and young women who possess independent embodied pleasure knowledge may feel more empowered and confident to speak up about contraceptive use or insist on STI testing *prior* to engaging in partnered sex as well. Therefore, my research shows the important role that encouraging girls to acquire both intellectual and embodied pleasure knowledge at a young age might play in reducing incidents of sexual assault, unwanted pregnancy, and STI transmission among young people.

Third, parents, educators, and policy-makers also need to think more critically about how the stakes of *not* possessing access to intellectual and embodied pleasure knowledge at a young age might be higher for LGBTQ youth. Given my finding that LGBTQ youth sometimes consciously or unconsciously employ masturbation as mechanism for “testing” their sexual attractions, this research

suggests that if girls were provided with the information and encouragement needed to pursue this kind of physical and psychological sexual self-exploration at an earlier age, that they might be more likely to accept and become more comfortable with their sexual identity, and “come out” sooner. As my research also suggests that LGBTQ youth’s struggles to experience pleasure alone and with a partner are often wrapped up in and exacerbated by their sexual identity struggles, it seems that earlier masturbation exposure and normalization could expedite the development of an embodied sexual subjectivity, and reduce later emotional and physical sexual struggles and risks that LGBTQ youth often experience. This is particularly significant given recent statistics that indicate that LGBTQ youth are more likely to drink alcohol or use drugs before engaging in a sexual encounter in comparison with heterosexual youth, more likely to become pregnant or get someone pregnant, and less likely to use a condom or other form of birth control (Saewyc, Poon, Homma, and Skay 2008; “Youth Risk Behavior Survey” 2011).

### **Strategies for Breaking the Silence**

The importance of taking active steps to challenge the dominant cultural understandings of female (self-) pleasure is evident. Thus, in this section I propose possible strategies for breaking the female masturbation silence. First, I advocate for families, educators, healthcare professionals, clergy, and policy-makers to work together to create safe spaces for girls and young women to learn and talk about female sexuality. Second, I discuss the importance of introducing girls and young women to alternative discourses about female sexuality and pleasure through a variety of mediums. Finally, I consider the potential significance of normalizing

female self-pleasure for feminist and LGBTQ activist agendas, as well as offer some strategies for how to advocate for female masturbation as a part of these social movements.

**Creating Safe Spaces to Learn About Female Sexuality.** As my research suggests with regard to masturbation, most girls struggle just to obtain adequate intellectual knowledge from any source and to find any safe spaces within which to engage with that knowledge on an experiential level. Thus, most girls do not even develop an understanding of female (self-) pleasure as normal, natural, and commonplace until late adolescence or young adulthood, if at all. Even then it often takes many years of masturbation “practice” for young women to acquire the embodied sexual knowledge required for them to experience masturbation, as well as partnered sexual activities, as emotionally and physically comfortable and pleasurable. These findings demonstrate the importance of girls being exposed to alternative representations and discussions of female sexuality and pleasure from reliable adult sources (e.g. parents or educators) beginning at an early age. As my research shows the impact of attending just one lecture in a college course or participating in one interview with a researcher like me on how young women come to understand and experience their sexuality, it is evident that providing safe spaces for girls and young women to learn factual information from “legitimate” educational sources about sexuality is crucial.

In addition to providing safe spaces for girls and young women to learn and talk about sexuality with reliable, educated adults, it is also important to create and facilitate forums for girls to speak about sexuality on both an abstract and personal

level with female peers. My research findings illustrate the important role that peers, especially female peers, can play in validating and normalizing behaviors like masturbation. For that reason, beyond learning sexual information by reading or listening to others, girls need the opportunity to develop a script for discussing sexuality and pleasure and to develop the comfort to articulate their sexual feelings and experiences, pleasures and pains, with other girls. My research suggests that one of the main reasons girls experience emotional stress regarding their sexual desires and behaviors is because they do not know what other girls are doing or feeling, or what to consider common, expected, or “normal.” Therefore, providing spaces for girls to talk openly to each other about sexuality without judgment would help them develop a more informed and realistic perspective about sexual “normalcy” and “healthiness.” As my research shows the significant normalizing effect even one frank sexuality conversation with a friend can have, and the excitement and pleasure girls often experience in these interactions, imagine the possibilities if girls were to regularly engage in such conversations throughout their childhood and adolescence. What is more, by engaging in formal or informal female sexuality discussion groups, girls would have the opportunity to develop an understanding of their individual sexual experiences in a larger societal context – to recognize that “the personal is political.” Instead of internalizing the blame for independent or partnered sexual struggles, girls might be more likely to think about the role broader social inequalities play in their private sexual lives, and thus be more proactive about taking steps to challenge those inequalities on both a local and global level.

**Introducing Alternative Discourses about Gender and Pleasure.** This research also clearly suggests the importance of making alternative discourses about gender, sexuality, and pleasure available to girls (and boys) beginning at a young age, from a variety of sources. My findings demonstrate the importance of parents, educators, health professionals, clergy, and policy-makers not only creating safe spaces where girls can speak about sexuality with knowledgeable adults and peers, but also taking active steps to provide girls with access to accurate and positive information about female sexuality and pleasure through numerous sources.

***“Reliable” Adults.*** Girls overwhelmingly lack access to information about female sexuality and pleasure from perceived “reliable” sources, such as parents, teachers, clergy, and medical professionals. Even if girls are able to acquire sexual knowledge from other sources, it is not valued as highly and does not possess the same normalizing potential. For this reason, it is essential that those individuals in a position to be a “reliable” source make a larger effort to grant girls access to factual, comprehensive information about female sexuality and pleasure, and that they be provided with the social and legal resources and support to do so. In these discussions, responsible and respected adults need to not only grant girls “permission” to be sexual and to expect pleasure, but also to provide medically accurate graphic representations of the physiology of female sexuality and pleasure, so that girls can develop an embodied connection with more abstract sexual information presented.

*Girls are Sexual Beings.* First, parents and educators need to communicate to girls that they have permission to be sexual beings. Even if they are wary of condoning girls' sexual behavior, it is still essential that they acknowledge that girls often possess sexual feelings and the desire to engage in sexual activity. To assume that girls who are not sexually active are not sexual is naïve, and only makes it more difficult for girls to develop a sense of confidence and control regarding their sexual bodies (which would help them to make more informed, safer sexual decisions). When imbued with this awareness, even if girls are taught that they should not be sexual with another person until they are older or married, they would be less likely to chastise themselves for their internal sexual feelings.

*Sexual Pleasure is a Female Right.* Second, girls need to be taught that they not only have the right to experience sex free from pain and violence, but that they also have the right to learn about and feel entitled to sexual pleasure (whether partnered or alone). Ideally, girls should learn from responsible, respected adults that sexual desire and pleasure are as common and healthy for girls as boys, as well as that girls are just as deserving of sexual pleasure. That way, even if this message is paired with prohibitive messages about engaging in pre-marital sex, girls still at least learn to expect pleasure in their future sexual experiences and to not accept unpleasant or painful sexual experiences as normative.

*Representing the "Mechanics" of Female Sexual Physiology.* Third, it is essential that girls be presented with medically accurate information and visual representations of female genital anatomy and physiology. Otherwise, as shown in this research, most girls will continue to possess a clearer and more comprehensive

understanding of, and consequently a higher degree of comfort with, male genital physiology and pleasure in contrast to their own. As a part of this, girls need to be provided with more details about the “mechanics” of female pleasure (e.g. arousal, lubrication, orgasm). My research findings suggest that a large proportion of girls desire to view representations of sexual bodies and activity “in action” prior to engaging in partnered or solitary sexual activity. Viewing, rather than simply hearing or reading, about sex and pleasure seems to allow girls and young women to connect with and absorb sexual information on a bodily, as well as intellectual, level. If parents or teachers were to provide girls with factually accurate sexual visuals through school or at home, girls would be less likely to turn to the largely heteronormative and male-pleasure-oriented representations in popular culture or mainstream pornography to gain this subjective body knowledge. At the very least, making such representations available to girls through reliable sources would help them to think more critically about and question the accuracy of popular representations. Thus, they could possess a more realistic and embodied understanding of their sexuality *before* engaging in sexual activity, and be less likely to experience emotional or physical sexual struggles (partnered or alone).

*Teaching Girls “How” to Have Pleasure.* Fourth, as most girls did not know what it meant for a woman to “masturbate” or to experience an orgasm, providing information and representations explaining some of the logistics of *how* girls and women can attain pleasure (e.g. techniques for clitoral stimulation) and the possibilities for what pleasure might look or feel like (e.g. female ejaculation) for various women, whether partnered or alone, is also important for girls’ developing

an understanding of what it means specifically for female bodies to achieve orgasm or experience other pleasures. By debunking myths about the various “types” of orgasm (e.g. clitoral, vaginal, g-spot) and assumed hierarchies among them, as well as what “coming” may look or feel like in practice, for example, girls could develop a more realistic understanding of their sexual bodies. As a result, they could be more confident and comfortable with their sexuality and the experience of pleasure, and less likely to experience uncertainty or conflict about their sexual “normalcy.”

*Encouraging Girls to Masturbate.* Finally, given that most of the participants in this study did not learn much of the above information until late high school or college and through or after engaging in partnered sexual interactions, if at all, it is evident that girls would benefit most from having access to this intellectual knowledge at a much earlier age, before engaging in partnered sexual experiences. Without this knowledge most girls lack the know-how or motivation to seek out and develop embodied sexual knowledge on their own. Given the intellectual tools to develop this embodied sexual knowledge on their own, however, and to “practice” through masturbation, girls would be more likely to develop realistic expectations for sex and pleasure. What is more, they may feel less afraid of reducing their possibilities for partnered pleasure by masturbating, and instead focus on the potential of self-stimulation for increasing their partnered pleasure, health, and happiness.

Be that as it may, parents, educators, clergy, and medical professionals should be wary of advocating the pursuit of self-pleasure solely as a mechanism for maintaining girls’ abstinence. In fact, my research indicates that such a strategy



could alienate girls if framed solely in terms of abstinence. While some young women indicated that masturbation facilitated their capacity to avoid partnered sex in specific situations, few communicated that masturbation prevented them from desiring partnered sex altogether. Rather, masturbation helped them to debunk the prevailing assumption that men (and boys) possess ownership and power over women's (and girls') bodies and sexuality, allowing them to feel more entitled and empowered to exert control over their own sexual lives. The knowledge that they did not "need" a partner to quench their sexual urges, for example, imbued them with the freedom to wait to engage in sexual relationships that felt both physically and emotionally pleasurable and safe. What this finding does suggest, though, is that providing girls with the encouragement and intellectual tools they need to independently explore their sexuality (without framing it as being solely about maintaining abstinence) may help to delay their first partnered sexual experience, reduce their overall number of partners, and decrease gendered power disparities in the sexual relationships in which they do choose to engage. In the end, while advocating masturbation as a mechanism for maintaining abstinence within an abstinence-only-until-marriage education program would certainly be more effective and beneficial than otherwise, my research suggests that it might be more effective in more comprehensive programs or contexts to discuss masturbation as an independent sexual activity with independent and partnered sexual benefits where making it easier to say "no" to partnered sex is only one of a spectrum of positive consequences.

***The Internet.*** My research shows how the Internet can function as an important educational and normalizing tool with regard to female sexuality, but that girls and young women do not often take the initiative, have the privacy, or know where to find “reliable” information online. Given how many girls and young women have access to the Internet, it is shocking how many are not able to acquire normalizing sexual knowledge through this source. Therefore, it is imperative that parents, teachers, clergy, and health professionals, for example, provide girls with knowledge about sexual education websites that provide accurate, unbiased sexual information (e.g. *Sexetc.com*). Girls should also be provided with resources for finding reliable, age-appropriate websites that provide logistics and representations of female sexual physiology and functioning, including *how* to masturbate (and if such sites do not exist, they should be created!). My research also suggests that providing girls with access to unstructured online forums where they can informally and anonymously talk about stigmatized sexuality topics and share their related sexual pleasures and pains may also be an important normalizing tool. While not without risks (e.g. girls judging or bullying each other about their sexual feelings or behaviors), such forums would provide girls not only with the opportunity to acquire intellectual knowledge about female sexuality and pleasure, but to cultivate a script for discussing their sexual desires and experiences with other girls, and to develop a sense of entitlement, confidence, and comfort to pursue and experience sexual pleasure.

***Media.*** As this research shows, because girls rarely hear about pleasure, let alone self-pleasure, from legitimate sources, such as parents, schools, or religious

communities, they largely rely on informal sources such as popular media for information about pleasure. Despite the overwhelming visibility of female sexuality, in contrast to the multitude of depictions and discussions of male sexual subjectivity and agency in the media, however, girls and young women are rarely, if ever, represented as experiencing themselves as independent sexual beings, possessing sexual desire, or feeling entitlement to sexual pleasure (Frank 2013). Therefore, it is important to put pressure on popular media outlets to include more diverse representations of gender and sexuality, particularly with regards to female (self-) pleasure. At the very least, injecting more references to “masturbation” by women and in the context of female desire and behavior into television or film dialogue, for instance, or providing more depictions of women receiving oral sex, would help girls and young women to learn that many girls and women in the United States in fact do pleasure themselves (and receive pleasure from others) and enjoy it, just like boys and men.

Regardless of *how* female masturbation is depicted (even if it is demonized), any discussions or representations would help to normalize it as a topic of discussion. The use of the term “masturbation” as a label for female behavior or a topic of discussion between women would demonstrate to viewers that this term does not have to solely apply to men’s experiences, behaviors, and conversations. Therefore, even seemingly negative depictions or associations could have positive value as a step towards disrupting the silence and challenging dominant heterosexist discourses. Access to any discourse on masturbation (even a highly prohibitive one) may provide individuals with the opportunity to make meaning of

their experiences and to develop a language and comfort discussing masturbation with others. Some of these representations may even help to reconstruct female masturbation as a normative, healthy practice if actresses or characters that young people admire or relate to are depicted talking about or engaging in masturbatory behavior. Either way, such representations could expose viewers to topics and perspectives that have previously been deemed inappropriate or even “dangerous” for girls or women, arming them with information (however biased or inaccurate) they have likely not received from “legitimate” sources of knowledge, such as the sexual education classroom, religious institutions, or discussions with parents.

*Pornography.* By demonstrating that many girls and young women turn to mainstream pornography to learn about and make meaning of their sexual desires and behaviors despite the fact the majority of options available for free online are male-oriented and often highly misogynistic, this research illustrates the importance of applying this same pressure to the mainstream pornography industry as well. If more pornography existed that was “female-friendly,” in the sense that it represented independent and partnered sexual behaviors that actually *feel* good for most real women, more girls and young women could consume pornography as a tool for developing embodied sexual knowledge and comfort, and experiencing pleasure, without the emotional conflict that they often experience currently.

*Religious Communities.* While it is obviously preferable for girls and young women to be introduced to explicitly positive discourses about female sexuality and pleasure, as mentioned above, my research does suggest that there may be some value in exposing girls and young women to even prohibitive sexuality discourses.

As girls and young women raised in particular conservative religious or cultural communities generally lack access to any discourses on female sexuality, as my research shows, being granted access to any discourse, even a negative one, can at the very least help to normalize the *discussion* of female sexuality. In this way, girls and young women in these communities could be provided with the opportunity to not only develop a script for talking about female sexuality, but to feel a sense of solidarity and camaraderie with others. As shown in this research, young women often took just as much pleasure in talking about their sexuality in the context of “struggle” and “addiction” for the first time as those who engaged in similar discussions, but from a more positive perspective. If girls and young women could be provided with institutional and moral support for acknowledging and attempting to overcome their sexuality-related struggles, as boys and men generally are, they could take solace in knowing that they are not alone, and that their transgressions are shared by others. Accordingly, girls and young women in these communities might be less likely to internalize blame for these struggles.

**Feminist and LGBTQ Activism.** While masturbation has historically been embraced by women’s and gay rights movements as a symbolic act of political resistance, given the number of young women who continue to struggle to pursue and experience masturbation in an embodied, pleasurable way, I would argue that a revitalization of this aspect of feminist and LGBTQ movements may be necessary today. My findings suggest that the bodily knowledge and comfort acquired through masturbation may have important implications for a variety of aspects of girls’ and young women’s sexual health, as well as playing an important role in increasing

their awareness of and capacity to resist hegemonic sexuality discourses and practices. Therefore, I argue that it is essential for activists to advocate and provide spaces for arming girls and young women with the intellectual tools and social support they need to masturbate, so that they might develop an individual embodied sexual subjectivity and sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure and safety (whether alone or with a partner) *and* the desire and motivation to fight against broader social inequalities on a personal and political level.

These research findings also complicate the prevailing feminist assumption that female masturbation is necessarily pleasurable and liberating. My findings illuminate how context-dependent individual experiences and feelings regarding masturbation truly are for young women in the United States. Given that hegemonic discourses may be reflected and reinscribed in and through young women's masturbation experiences in various ways, activists should be wary of imposing a homogenous definition of what it means to masturbate for women from diverse backgrounds for fear of perpetuating, rather than challenging those discourses. Feminists need to be cognizant of the polarized, double-edged nature of masturbation – how an activity can be the most positive, pleasurable experience for one woman, and the most horrible, painful experience for another; how for some women masturbation epitomizes the control they feel over their body and sexuality, yet for others illuminates how completely out of control they feel over their body and sexuality. My research findings also suggest that activists need to be careful about going too far in the opposite direction to make a point and challenge oppressive gender and sexuality norms – as valorizing the clitoris, for example, at

the expense of the vagina, also marginalizes the girls and young women who prefer or simply enjoy vaginal stimulation.

In addition, as such sexual “problems” as pornography and prostitution have been used strategically within governmental discourses in the past to “reinstate certain norms about what constitutes healthy sexuality and the proper family,” it is not surprising that a discursive silence around female masturbation may similarly function to recuperate heteronormativity and family values rhetoric in the United States (Juffer 1998, 34). As policies concerning moral issues are typically fought out in the political arena in the United States through symbolic politics, the discursive and legal regulation of other private and morally “suspect” non-reproductive sexual practices, relating to birth control, abortion, homosexuality, prostitution, and pornography, for example, can be directly tied to the public discourse (or lack of) around female self-pleasure. In this vein, I argue that the societal treatment of other political issues relating to women’s right to make autonomous decisions about their bodies and sexuality directly relates to the absence of a public dialogue regarding female entitlement to sexual self-pleasure. In essence, rendering both the discussion and experience of independent female sexual desire and pleasure invisible and deviant serves to silence and demonize other “taboo” or morally controversial sexual and bodily desires and practices (for women and men) as well.

Breaking the silence on female masturbation and working to destigmatize solitary sexual desire and behavior for women may have important implications for increasing the social acceptability, and subsequently legality, of other stigmatized sexual behaviors or practices as well. For example, normalizing female

masturbation (in combination with the already significant popular social acceptability of male masturbation) might help to decouple “sexuality” from exclusively (hetero)attraction, behavior, and reproduction. If it were to become more socially acceptable and considered “healthy” for individuals to possess sexual desire and engage in sexual behavior that is not Other-oriented at all, society at large may in turn become more comfortable with other types of non-heterosexual attraction or behavior. Many people might sooner be able to conceptualize same-sex sexual and romantic relationships, including marriage, as normal and natural and an ethical and legal right. Similarly, normalizing masturbation for women and men would likely be accompanied by an increased disassociation between sexual desire and behavior and reproduction. If masturbation – as a form of sexual activity that blatantly serves no procreative function – could become more socially accepted, it is possible that the idea of desiring to engage in partnered sex that does not result in the birth of a child could also become more normalized. While many of the individuals who oppose birth control and abortion do so for other reasons, it seems likely that at least some individuals would be less resistant to providing women with legal and affordable access to a variety of forms of birth control and abortion as a result of such an ideological shift.

In conclusion, while masturbation may serve as an individual act of political liberation for some girls and young women, for others it may only exacerbate their feelings and experiences of gender, sexuality, ethnic, racial, or religious oppression. Given the influence external discourses have on girls’ and young women’s private sexual feelings and behaviors, simply advocating the pursuit of self-pleasure as an



individual act of liberation, empowerment, and resistance as activist movements have in the past would likely not be effective for today's generation of young people. Therefore, it is essential that activists focus on increasing awareness of the larger cultural discourses and practices that produce the unequal social conditions which render many girls and young women unable to experience masturbation as pleasurable and liberating. Only by focusing on exposing and deconstructing dominant negative sexuality discourses, and breaking the cultural silence around female (self-) pleasure, will all young people hopefully one day gain access to positive sexuality discourses from a variety of sources at an early age, which might help to more normalize their sexual feelings and behaviors whether partnered or alone.

### **Directions for Future Research**

In addition to illuminating many previously unexplored aspects of the relationship between gender, power, and self-pleasure for girls and young women of diverse ethnic, religious, and sexual identities, this research has also raised a number of new questions worthy of further investigation. First, additional exploration and analysis of the current data is warranted. I limited the scope of my dissertation project to the four data chapters presented in this manuscript to facilitate my timely completion of the project, as well as maintain the cohesion of the document. For example, in this dissertation I focus almost exclusively on experiences of solitary masturbation. Although, my research did generate significant data on experiences of partnered masturbation as well. Therefore, in the future I would like to analyze participants' understandings and experiences of partnered

self-pleasure, both in-person and virtually (through phone, text, or video chat). My research also produced significant data on young women's attitudes and experiences regarding pornography. Given the dearth of research that examines women as active consumers of pornography (see Attwood 2005), further analysis of participants' embodied and disembodied sexual experiences viewing mainstream pornography is imperative as well.

As female masturbation is a highly understudied topic, further research on perspectives and experiences of self-pleasure for women of all age groups is needed (e.g. childhood masturbation, masturbation during menstruation or menopause). A gender comparative study might also provide useful data for understanding the gender gap in self-pleasure and considering the practical possibilities of masturbation as a tool for reducing gender inequalities (and potential dangers) in early partnered (hetero)sexual encounters.

As discussed in Chapter 3, as part of this exploratory study I actively attempted to recruit participants of a variety of ethnic/racial, religious, and sexual identities. While not explicitly employing an intersectional approach, I did consider how certain identities might converge or be particularly salient with regard to gendered ideologies, discourses, and experiences of female masturbation in my analysis. While my sample did not include enough individuals from many identity categories to make large generalizations, including individuals from diverse groups allowed me to identify particular intersections that might warrant further investigation. For example, my research suggests that further examination of the relationship between gender, pleasure, and religion would provide important

insight into the perspectives and experiences of individuals often excluded from sexuality research. Given that my sample primarily included individuals belonging to Christian-based faiths and those who do not affiliate themselves with any religion (which is consistent with the bulk of sexuality research), studying ideologies and experiences related to female masturbation, as well as other more general sexuality topics and behaviors, for other religious groups (e.g. Muslim, Jewish) is particularly imperative. Though, a closer examination of the sexual beliefs and lives of women and men within specific conservative Christian-based religions would be beneficial as well. With this said, given that this was a U.S. based study, more research on female masturbation which includes individuals from diverse races, ethnicities, and nationalities both within and outside the United States would also be important. A cross-cultural approach might also be useful for considering various factors and potential interventions regarding the normalization of female self-pleasure.

Further research which examines the relationship between sexual identity and self-pleasure would be important for expanding our understanding of the lived experiences and struggles of young LGBTQ individuals. As my research suggested that some young LGBTQ women employ masturbation and pornography in the service of “testing” their sexual orientation, I think that further research on how the embodied sexual knowledge gained through these behaviors may facilitate both an individual’s questioning and acceptance of their sexuality, as well as influence their motivation and confidence to “come out” to others is needed. Exploring asexual individuals’ perspectives on and experiences of masturbation would also be illuminating.

Finally, because my sample solely consisted of self-selected current or former undergraduate college students, further attention to the relationship between education and socioeconomic status and female masturbation is also warranted. More research is needed to investigate how access to masturbation information and experience may be facilitated or constrained by money (e.g. to purchase a vibrator, access the Internet, access courses and workshops on sexuality), time/energy (e.g. possessing access to leisure time to masturbate), and space/privacy (e.g. having one's own bedroom), for instance.

Beyond masturbation, the significant theoretical and practical implications resulting from the current research suggest the importance of examining the lived experiences of girls' and women's sexuality more generally. Given the lack of research in this area, there is a strong need for more research which directly asks girls and women about their feelings, attitudes, and experiences of sexuality in particular. For example, my research findings suggest that there are a number of ways in which technology is increasingly shaping, constraining, and facilitating sexualities. Widespread Internet access, for instance, has resulted in new possibilities for obtaining intellectual and embodied sexual knowledge. Thus, future research on the extent to which women's (and men's) understandings and experiences of sexuality and pleasure are influenced by technological changes, as well as how the appropriation of technology for sexual uses is increasingly blurring the boundaries between public and private, visible and invisible sexualities would provide important insight into modern sexualities and pleasures.

## Conclusion

By grounding my research in the lived experiences of actual women, and then examining their personal experiences in the context of larger societal discourses, in this manuscript I have attempted to give voice to women and perspectives that have previously been silenced on a topic that has been largely neglected in academic and popular discourses. Based on these narratives, I demonstrate the myriad of ways that female masturbation may operate as a tool of female social control and oppression. Primarily, I reveal the extent to which most girls and young women are compelled to discipline their private sexual desires and behaviors to conform to deeply instilled hegemonic gender and sexuality ideals (e.g. men are more innately “sexual” than women, cult of the pure woman, sex should be phallogentric). I show how many of the same inequalities and struggles girls and young women often experience in partnered sexual encounters are frequently reproduced in their solitary sexual experiences (e.g. pressure to orgasm through penetration, orgasm as “work”). I also demonstrate how even seemingly positive discourses on female sexuality may constrain girls’ and young women’s understandings and experiences of self-pleasure. For example, I illustrate how a “pleasure imperative” discourse that demands that women be sexually knowledgeable, available, and “successful” pressures some girls and young women to arm their bodies with the skills they perceive as required to succeed in the (hetero)sexual marketplace, regardless of their personal desires or pleasures. I illustrate how some girls and young women force themselves to engage in masturbation not in pursuit of self-pleasure, but rather to prove their sexual aptitude and their body’s capacity to produce and

visibly display pleasure for a (usually male) partner. In this way, this research illustrates how even seemingly sexually “liberating” discourses and sexual activity can be co-opted as a tool of social control.

On the other hand, my research also highlights the potential of the embodied experience of self-pleasure for increasing girls’ and young women’s capacity for resisting oppressive gender and sexuality discourses and behaviors, developing an agentic sexual subjectivity, and feeling sexually empowered or liberated. My findings suggest that girls for whom masturbation is more normalized may be less likely to monitor and regulate their sexual feelings and behaviors (whether alone or partnered) to conform to dominant patriarchal gender ideologies, and subsequently experience less emotional or physical sexual struggles. My research shows how the bodily knowledge, comfort, and sense of control often acquired through the pursuit of self-pleasure increases not only girls’ and young women’s sense of sexual autonomy, independence, and self-reliance, but also their capacity and motivation to exercise agency regarding both pleasure and safety in partnered sexual situations as well. Finally, my findings also indicate that the embodied sexual knowledge acquired through masturbation often helps girls and young women to recognize oppressive gender and sexuality discourses and practices, and to ultimately develop the motivation and confidence to take active steps to challenge them on both an individual and larger societal level.

In this way, my research illustrates how the same sexual or bodily practice may function or be appropriated as a tool of both gender *oppression* and *resistance*, *social control* and *liberation*. These findings illuminate how context-dependent

individual experiences and feelings regarding masturbation truly are for young women, and how important it is to develop a deeper understanding of these influences and their implications in order to better arm today's girls and young women with the tools they need to develop an embodied sexual subjectivity and sense of entitlement to sexual safety and pleasure, alone or with a partner. Thus, this research conveys the responsibility parents, educators, healthcare professionals, clergy, policy-makers, and activists have to take active steps to break the silence around female (self-) pleasure, to work together to provide girls and young women with opportunities and safe spaces to acquire comprehensive and accurate sexual information and to develop a script for discussing female sexuality and pleasure with others, so that all girls can learn that they have the freedom and equal right, if they so desire, to live and feel as active, embodied, desirous, (self-) pleasure-seeking sexual citizens.

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APPENDIX A  
ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

A primary characteristic of engaging in feminist research is reflexivity. To this end, I kept a research journal, where I would reflect on my experiences and feelings throughout the research process. I wrote entries immediately after each one-on-one and group interview, as well as after recruitment attempts, or when any research-related issues or conflicts arose. In this section I discuss some of the ethical dilemmas and difficult decisions I faced during the course of this project.

### **Facilitating Religious Inclusivity**

As explained earlier, because sexually conservative and religiously observant individuals have often been left out of sexuality research in the past, I felt it was particularly important to include such young women in my research. While I sought to maintain as much consistency as possible in my recruitment and interview process, at times I found it necessary to amend my recruitment script or interview schedule to more readily facilitate these individuals' participation and comfort. In the end, this flexibility not only allowed me to recruit a higher number of religiously observant young women to participate, but to gather richer data.

### **Recruiting through Religiously Conservative Communities**

I encountered an interesting ethical dilemma while attempting to recruit through ASU's Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS) organization on campus. In response to the recruitment email that I sent to the leaders of the primary LDS student group, I received an email and phone call from the director of LDS services at ASU asking for more information to help him decide whether he could "allow" his students to participate. I called him back and explained that my study was an exploratory study on women and sexuality, which was particularly interested in



giving voice to women from a variety of backgrounds, who are often not included in this type of research. At the time I was recruiting for individual interviews and focus groups, and he indicated that he was leaning towards only allowing the women to participate in a group interview, because he felt that they would be more comfortable discussing sexuality-related topics in a “homogenous” environment. I was concerned that for this group of women, coming from a largely prohibitive sexual background, that they would regulate each other in a group setting, only saying what they are “supposed to” for fear of the potential social repercussions. I was also concerned that the director might suggest that he or one of the other church leaders sit in on the group interview to supervise. While not explicitly sharing these concerns with the director, I explained that many young women who are not accustomed to discussing sexuality in groups tend to be more comfortable with one-on-one interviews. At this time, when he asked about the types of questions I might ask, I mentioned questions on sources of sexual education, reactions or interpretations to sex-related media representations, and how other people talk about sex as examples. I was hesitant to mention that topics such as sexual pleasure, orgasm, masturbation, or pornography would be discussed for fear that he would automatically deny participation. He explained that he would share the additional information I provided with the LDS student council and they would vote on whether LDS church members could participate.

Immediately after our phone call ended, I felt concerned that I had misled him. The last thing I wanted was for him to allow the women to participate, and then for them to feel deceived about the content of the interview. Despite the fact that I

generally was not in the habit of divulging the details of the topics that would be discussed in the interviews or focus groups in advance with potential participants, I felt that in this case full disclosure was necessary. I then sent the director a follow-up email explaining that I was concerned that I did not provide him with an adequate amount of detail regarding the topics that might arise, and that I did not want him or any of the students to be caught too off guard or put off by any of the issues that might arise. I reiterated that any and all questions posed are completely optional, but that depending on the flow of discussion, it is likely that I would inquire about “perspectives and experiences regarding sexual education (at home, school, church, etc.), sexual health (contraceptives, sexually transmitted infections, etc.), sexual pleasure (orgasm, masturbation, etc.), and pornography.” To my surprise, he approved the study and I received an email from one of the student leaders the following week with a list of women who were willing to participate in individual or group interviews and their availability.

### **Using Familiar Language**

While I sought to maintain as much consistency as possible with regard to topics and questions addressed in the one-on-one interviews, in some cases I chose to make slight adjustments to the wording of my interview questions to make the participant feel more comfortable and to increase the likelihood that they would be able to provide a meaningful response. For example, I spoke to a number of religious young women who made it very clear early on in the interview that they only believe in engaging in sex (or any kind of sexual activity) in the context of marriage, and that they have not strayed from that belief. So instead of asking, “How would

you feel if you found out that your partner masturbates?” for example, I instead asked, “When you’re married, how do you think you would feel if you found out that your husband masturbates?” By reformulating some of my questions to incorporate vocabulary familiar to a particular participant in this way, I was able to show participants from diverse backgrounds that I understand and respect their beliefs. This was particularly important given that I was already asking these young women about a taboo topic that they were likely not accustomed to discussing with others. As a result of employing this technique, even the most sexually conservative and religious participants were willing and comfortable to answer such questions. By making this small accommodation, I was not only able to provide a safe, non-judgmental space for these young women to discuss sensitive sexuality topics, but I was also able to obtain rich data on an understudied topic from a population often excluded from sexuality research.

### **Effects of the Research Process on Participants**

As a feminist researcher, it was important for me to reflect on the material impact participating in my research may have had on participants, and particularly to ensure that participants did not experience negative outcomes. Beyond generating data and avoiding negative repercussions, it was important to me that participants *benefit* from the research process. Through participants’ written reflections after their research participation was complete, in the end I was able to ascertain that the overwhelming majority not only enjoyed the opportunity to learn and talk or write about sexuality in a legitimated, educational, non-judgmental

forum, but also that they felt more confident and “liberated” to learn through factual information I provided during the research process that they are sexually “normal.”

### **Acknowledging and Minimizing Potential Negative Repercussions**

After conducting my first several interviews, I became acutely aware that I was playing a semi-therapist role for many of my participants. I found myself prompting interviewees on topics that were not blatantly related to my research interests or allowing them to elaborate more than necessary, simply because I felt that the participant was experiencing emotional turmoil or anxiety about a particular issue, and I was fearful about shifting topics too abruptly or trivializing the issue for them. I also could sense when it seemed as if a participant would benefit from discussing a particular experience, emotion, or issue with someone she deemed an “objective” source. Early on it became very clear that if I was going to be asking about women’s experiences and feelings about pleasure, I was going to hear a lot about their experiences and feelings of displeasure and pain as a part of their sexual narratives.<sup>31</sup> For example, several young women spoke of recent coerced sexual encounters by which they were clearly troubled. In these cases, I hesitated to give any advice, since I was certainly not qualified to do so. However, when a participant expressed uncertainty regarding whether she was to blame in a situation that clearly sounded coerced or what I would have defined as “date rape,” I did tell her that it does not matter if she had a “crush” on the guy or if she wanted to engage in some sexual activity with him; she always has the right to say “no” and if

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<sup>31</sup> Twelve participants referred to one or more past personal coercive or abusive sexual interactions in a one-on-one interview or journal.

her consent was not given, a sexual assault did take place. In these cases I always offered the participant information regarding campus counseling services and hotlines, following up with an email with all the contact details. In some of these instances the participants revealed to me that they already see a therapist, but that they had not brought up these topics for discussion. In these cases I encouraged the women to bring up these topics that are clearly on their mind with the professional with whom they already have a relationship.

One particular example caused me to worry that my interviews facilitated the discussion of certain topics that might cause the participant distress. At the end of my interview with Ana (not her real name), we determined, unfortunately, that somehow the audio recording file was corrupted. I asked her if she would be willing to meet with me again to re-do the interview. She was willing and we scheduled a time to meet the following week. At the beginning of the second interview, Ana revealed to me that she suffered a panic attack several hours after our previous interview, and she believed it to be a result of our discussion. Of course, I was immediately concerned that perhaps my interviews were somehow antagonizing or traumatic for some women. We determined in the second interview that she had made some new connections regarding a childhood molestation experience and some of her later sexual desires, emotions, and experiences in the initial interview, and that this was the likely cause of her anxiety. I was able to recover the original audio file and use that in my data analysis. Nonetheless, in this case it turned out to

be good that we had the opportunity to further discuss some of Ana's issues and concerns in the second interview.<sup>32</sup>

I also had some concerns about the potential negative effects of journaling on my participants. Some women did express feeling pressure to "know" their bodies in their journals, and as discussed in earlier chapters, a sense of disappointment in themselves for not being able to experience pleasure in the way they desire, with a partner or on their own. While this is likely the result of larger underlying societal discourses, it is also possible that in the context of my sex-positive course, some women may have felt intimidated by what they perceived as higher expectations for enacting and experiencing sexual agency. Overall, based on participants comments in later journal entries and written feedback after the final journals were collected, I was able to determine that the process of keeping these journals overwhelmingly positively affected these same young women, helping them to develop a more embodied sexual subjectivity and discover a newfound sense of empowerment and entitlement to take their sexuality into their own hands.

### **Educational and Normalizing Function of the Research Process**

Written participant feedback on the one-on-one and group interviews, as well as journals, was overwhelmingly positive. While some women indicated that they felt awkward, embarrassed, or uncomfortable at times, the majority of young women found their participation to not only be enjoyable, but useful as well. Consistent with Campbell, Sefl, Wasco, and Ahrens' (2004) finding that creating an "emotionally safe" space for individuals to share their narratives with an

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<sup>32</sup> Because I recovered Ana's original interview, I did not include her second interview in the dataset.

“interested, engaged, and empathetic researcher” can be both “validating and beneficial” (258), a number of my participants expressed that despite their initial apprehension or nervousness about participating, that they felt surprisingly comfortable sharing personal sexual information in a “safe” and “judgment-free” space. The fact that only a few interview participants ever opted to not respond to a particular question is consistent with this sense of comfort. With regard to the interviews, it may have been the temporary nature of these interactions that participants found so comforting (Campbell et al. 2004), as the social consequences of discussing a taboo topic with a stranger are less severe than with someone whom one has a closer relationship. In spite of this, there remains a likelihood that at least some participants did not completely reveal themselves to me in the interviews or journals, especially given the highly taboo, and potentially embarrassing and shameful nature of the topic of female masturbation.

It became apparent early in the interview process that these young women perceived me as an objective, knowledgeable source of information, as they would often ask me outright at the end of the interview if what they shared about their sexual desires, emotions, and experiences is “normal.” At first I was hesitant to answer such questions, but then it became clear to me that this was an important opportunity for these young women to receive validation of their experiences and feelings, as well as reliable sexual knowledge, in a way they may have never had access to previously. I would generally start by vaguely explaining that women’s bodies are all different, and that there is a large variety in what women enjoy or do not enjoy sexually. I would explain that there is no “normal,” but rather a spectrum

of female sexual desires and behaviors and that they are all legitimate. In addition, whenever a woman mentioned concern that she did not orgasm or did not enjoy vaginal penetration, I would wait until the end of the interview, and then explain that the majority of women require clitoral stimulation to achieve orgasm and that there is no “right” or “wrong” way to orgasm. This fact alone appeared to provide participants with an immense sense of relief, since, as shown in earlier chapters, the cultural messages they received clearly suggested to them that they were “abnormal.” As with interviewees, journal-keepers often revealed how the process of keeping the journals and exposure to the course discussions and materials, helped to make female masturbation feel more “normal” for them. Women with a long history of masturbating, but who had often felt ashamed or “dirty” about it, expressed relief to know that they are completely “normal” and in fact in the majority for engaging in such behavior.

Many interviewees noted in their post-interview written feedback that participating in the interview was a “learning experience” for them, and made them feel more “normal” and “comfortable” about their sexuality. LGBTQ participants and heterosexual young women who had not previously engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse (two groups of young women often excluded from sexuality research), in particular, communicated that participating in a one-on-one interview helped them to feel more “normal” and “included.” They were frequently surprised that the majority of the interview questions “applied” to them, expressing that they had initially been concerned that they would not be a “good” interview subject. Because the term “sexuality” in our society tends to be narrowly constructed as pertaining to



those who engage in (penetrative) “sex,” these individuals appreciated the way the questions I asked (and did not ask) challenged the assumption that anyone who has not or is not having penetrative sex is not sexual or does not possess “sexuality.” In this way, it is evident how the “research process open[ed] up new opportunities for creating meaningful experiences for members of hidden populations” (Campbell et al. 2004, 260).

Both interview and journal participants also conveyed their appreciation for being provided with the opportunity to engage in useful sexual self-reflection through the research process. The overwhelming majority indicated over the course of their journals that they enjoyed the process of recording and reflecting on their sexual experiences, desires, and conflicts – many expressing that the journaling process helped them develop a better understanding of themselves and their feelings and behaviors. In fact, some participants indicated that they would continue to keep a journal after the semester had ended because they found it to be so beneficial. Thus, the positive effects of research participation may continue beyond the immediate impact (Campbell et al. 2004). The majority of participants expressed feeling a sense of liberation, empowerment, excitement, and often catharsis, as a result of talking or writing, and consequently learning, about their sexuality through this research.

### **Material Impact of Research on Participants’ Sexual Lives**

It was also important for me to reflect on how this research may have materially impacted participants’ sexual lives and experiences. I sought to consider how the process of studying young women’s sexualities might shape how

participants experience and interpret their own sexualities. As Debra Curtis (2009) encountered in her research on how global influences shape Nevisian girls' sexual subjectivities, asking girls and young women to recall their sexual histories and to describe their sexual pleasures and pains may potentially influence how they "recognize, organize, or make sense of their sexualities" (175-176). Sometimes, for instance, when I asked in a one-on-one interview if a participant had ever stimulated herself during sex with a partner, they stated that they had never previously thought about partnered masturbation as a sexual possibility; they then indicated that they might consider it as a future sexual option. In addition, some journal participants appeared to feel pressure to "perform" in their journals, to write what they thought was "normal" or what, I, as the researcher, wanted to hear. They indicated that they purposely tried to engage in more "exciting" or "adventurous" sexual activities, so that they would have more interesting material to discuss in their journals. On the other side of the coin, some journal participants expressed early on in their journals that they were purposely *not* masturbating, despite their desire to do so, because they knew that meant they would have to write about it in the journal later.

Interestingly, by the end of the journals, most of these women "gave in" and masturbated, and then wrote about it, expressing that they found it liberating to confront their discomfort on the topic and to embrace their sexuality. Other women, who indicated that they had never masturbated before or who had always felt masturbation was "wrong," expressed that in the context of this course they now felt more comfortable to try masturbating, to visit a sex store (to potentially purchase a

vibrator), or even just to speak about masturbation with a friend or seek out knowledge about pleasure. For example, one young woman wrote about how the class inspired her to examine her vulva utilizing a hand mirror, expressing astonishment as to the complexity of her genitalia of which she had previously been unaware. In this way it is evident how simply asking girls and young women to share their feelings and experiences regarding self-pleasure may inadvertently encourage them to express and articulate certain sexual desires and practices, while simultaneously discouraging others. It is also apparent that research which requires the articulation of sexual images or narratives may have the potential to inspire, or even produce, particular sexual desires and subjectivities (Curtis 2009), but that the directions this might take are highly context specific.

### **The Vocabulary of “Masturbation”**

According to Marjorie Devault (2004), paying attention to language is essential for feminist research. In this vein, I spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the use of language throughout the research design, data collection, analysis, and writing process (both my own and that of my participants). One major dilemma I encountered in this research was what term to use to describe the touching or otherwise stimulation of one’s own breasts, genitals, or other erogenous zones for sexual purposes. All of the young women with whom I spoke were familiar with the term masturbation, at least in the abstract. Although, as discussed in Chapter 4, for many participants “masturbation” was not a term they necessarily identified with in terms of their own independent sexual desires and experience. Instead, they often associated “masturbation” with boys and men, or with

stigmatizing religious and medical discourses. As mentioned in Chapter 3, approximately half of the one-on-one interview participants referenced masturbation before I explicitly asked about it. Many of them did not use the term “masturbation” to describe their own or other women’s behaviors though. Lacking a vocabulary specific to female masturbation, some participants used male-specific masturbation euphemisms instead, such as “jacking off.” Still others grappled to find any words to describe their experiences of self-stimulation, settling for vague terminology, such as “when I’m ‘with’ myself.”

Needless to say, for most participants, “masturbation” was not adequate to describe their feelings and experiences. As Devault (2004) notes, “language itself reflects male experience” (227). Thus, the very lack of language for young women to draw on to make meaning of their experiences of self-pleasure was an obstacle to some participants’ ability to express their related emotions and experiences in this research. This disconnect perpetuates sexual inequalities not only by denying women the right to express themselves as sexual beings, but by marking those who do as deviant.

Wary of reinscribing these sexual inequalities in and through my research process by “translating” participants’ experiences into language developed for male experiences (Devault 2004, 233), I worked to preserve the original language of my participants in both my follow-up interview questions and in my written analysis. Although, at times participants were so subtle in their masturbation references that I had to resort to asking, “When you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ earlier, were you referring to masturbation?” In this way, I may have inadvertently participated in coding their

behavior as “masturbation,” which may have had both negative and positive consequences. On the one hand, for participants who were raised with the belief that masturbation is a sin, for example, labeling their behavior with the term “masturbation” could have resulted in them experiencing increased emotional turmoil about their experiences. On the other hand, providing a forum for young women to use the term “masturbation” to describe their own behavior may also have helped them begin to challenge and deconstruct deeply internalized negative ideologies about masturbation as a term and a sexual behavior.

As a primary goal of this project was to illuminate the diversity of meanings associated with female masturbation for young women today, I struggled with how to write this disjuncture between young women’s experiences of self-pleasure and the language available to talk about it into this manuscript. Because the process of “naming” is a political one (Devault 2004, 244), I was wary of homogenizing and potentially mislabeling my participants’ feelings and experiences by imposing one word to capture their narratives in my analysis. According to Devault, when “language is ‘man-made’ it is not likely to provide, ready-made, the words that feminist researchers need to tell what they learn from other women” (245). All the same, I felt that not using the term “masturbation” at all solely because it is “man-made” would also be a disservice to my participants, as some of them did identify with and use the term to describe their own behavior. While adopting a replacement term, such as “self-stimulation,” might challenge dominant gender structures by formulating non- or less stigmatizing vocabulary for female self-pleasure, I believe that the stigma associated with women and the term “masturbation” needs to be

confronted head-on. While repackaging female masturbation in different language may help individual women to feel more comfortable talking about or engaging in solitary sexual behavior, ultimately it serves to perpetuate the invisibility of larger gender and sexual inequalities.

Thus, I believe that “to fully describe women’s experiences, we often need to go beyond the standard vocabulary” (Devault 2004, 230). In this spirit, I have made every effort throughout this manuscript to use participants’ own language to describe their experiences of self-pleasure. When that is not possible, as Devault does in her research on household work and routines, I use several different terms more or less interchangeably, including “masturbation,” “self-pleasure,” “self-stimulation,” “solitary pleasure,” “solitary sex,” and “independent pleasure.” By employing this strategy, I hoped to convey “subtle shadings of meaning” and difference with regards to experiences of female self-stimulation that would not be communicated if I opted to solely use the term “masturbation” or “self-stimulation,” for example. While I understand that this shifting vocabulary might be confusing at times, I believe this multi-layered vocabulary approach is crucial for the “process of shaping new meanings” of independent female sexuality and challenging existing hegemonic power structures on both on a discursive and material level (245).

APPENDIX B  
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

## FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

### INTRODUCTION & VERBAL CONSENT:

Thanks for agreeing to be part of the focus group. My name is Elena Frank. I'm a graduate student under the direction of Professor Rose Weitz in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University.

By consenting to participate, you are agreeing to join a study that involves sharing your perspective on some sexuality-related topics as part of an audio-recorded group interview with three to five other participants. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to respond to any questions. You also reserve the right to end your participation in the group interview at any time.

If you say YES, then your participation will last for approximately two hours. You will be asked to read a newspaper article and then discuss your perspective about the article with the group. You will also may be asked to respond to a series of discussion questions posed to the group, as well as complete a brief ten minute written questionnaire. Approximately fifty subjects will be participating in this study.

There are no known risks from taking part in this study, but in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, you may benefit from thinking through your own ideas and experiences and may appreciate the chance to increase our understanding of present-day attitudes and feelings regarding young women's sexuality, potentially influencing sexual education programs or public policies relating to young women's sexual health and psychological well-being.

Because this is a group interview, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. However, the researchers will not identify you in any reports, presentations, or publications that may be produced as a result of this study. In order to maintain confidentiality of your records, I, Elena Frank will store the data obtained from your focus group in a locked on-campus office, and will destroy the recording immediately after transcription is complete. Identifying information will not be requested from you during the interview, however if you do utilize place names or names of people during the group interview I will remove them during the transcription process.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. It is okay for you to say no. Even if you say yes now, you are free to say no later, and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study any data pertaining to your interview will be immediately destroyed.

There is no payment for your participation in the study. However, you will be provided with pizza, beverages, and cookies as compensation for your time.

Any questions you have concerning the research study or your participation in the study, before or after your consent, will be answered by Elena Frank, [Elena.Frank@asu.edu](mailto:Elena.Frank@asu.edu), PO



Box 874902, Tempe, AZ 85287 4092, (413)250-3702 or Rose Weitz, [Rose.Weitz@asu.edu](mailto:Rose.Weitz@asu.edu), PO Box 874902, Tempe, AZ 85287-4092, (480)965-6579.

If you have questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk; you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at 480-965-6788.

I have just explained the nature, demands, benefits and any risk of the project. By verbally providing your consent you agree knowingly to assume any risks involved. Remember, your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefit. In verbally consenting to participate in this research you are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies.

*Go around the room and have each participant give their verbal consent.*

#### A FEW GROUND RULES BEFORE WE START:

- I want you to know that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers, and it's okay to have a different opinion from other people in the group. It's really important for us to hear all the different points of view in the room. I want you to share your point of view, even if it is different from what others are saying, and I want you all to respect each other's opinions. Please don't make fun of what other people say.
- What is said in this room stays here. We want everyone to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues or topics come up.
- We ask that you make sure to speak clearly and that only one individual speak at a time. Also, please do not engage in any side conversations. If you have something to say, please share it with the whole group.
- While I may ask questions or jump in from time to time, you should talk primarily to each other rather than addressing your responses to me. However, I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.
- Before we get started, I want to remind you that we will be tape recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments.
- Although we will use each other's first names today, I will remove your names when I transcribe this discussion and will not use your real names in my research reports. You can be assured of complete confidentiality. No one will be able to link your name back to what you said and I am the only person who will listen to that recording. I am also going to ask all of you to keep what is said here confidential, so that everybody feels comfortable talking and knows what they say will not be repeated. Can you all do that?

We expect to be here until \_\_\_\_\_. We appreciate you giving us your time, and we want to make sure we end on time. I will be watching the clock and may need to interrupt the discussion at times and move us on to another question to be sure we have time to discuss all topics.

At about \_\_\_\_\_ (15 minutes before the end of our time together), we will end the focus group and ask you to complete a very short questionnaire.

## ICE-BREAKER QUESTION

Let's begin. We have asked you to wear a name tag to help us remember each others' names. Let's go around the room and introduce ourselves. Please give us your first name, and just for fun, tell us the part or parts of your body you like the best and why. I'll start...

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

Now I'm going to give you a recent *New York Times* article to read. You are welcome to write notes or underline directly on the paper. Once you are done reading the article, please spend a few minutes writing down your initial reaction to the article. Was there anything you found particularly interesting or surprising? Then we will discuss the article as a group in more detail.

- 1) Please share your initial reaction to the article. Was there anything you found particularly interesting or surprising?
  - a. Do the statistics presented in this article about vibrator use seem surprising or what you expected? For example, that over half of U.S. women have used vibrators, and nearly 80% have shared them with partners.
- 2) How do you feel about the fact that vibrators can now be purchased in mainstream drug stores? Are being advertised on TV?
  - a. Many of the women quoted in this article suggest that being able to conveniently purchase vibrators at the drug store or discreetly online is "sexually empowering" for women and allows women to feel like they have more "ownership of their sexuality." What do you think?
  - b. We see lots of commercials on TV for Viagra and other erectile dysfunction products. Why do you think "discretion" in advertising and packaging is so important when it comes to marketing vibrators for women?
- 3) The term "masturbation" does not appear anywhere in this article. Why do you think that is?
  - a. Several of the women quoted in this article suggest that previously there was a "creep" or "shame" factor associated with women purchasing pleasure-enhancing sexual products like vibrators, but that now that stigma has significantly decreased. What do you think contributes to people's perceptions of vibrators and female masturbation in general?
  - b. Hypothetically speaking, what do you think would need to change for all women to feel "free" to masturbate? Do you think that would be a good or bad thing?
  - c. How do you think guys feel about women who masturbate?
- 4) The article mentions Dr. Laura Berman and how she is known for encouraging mothers to buy vibrators for their teenage daughters. What do you think about this?
  - a. What do you think about masturbation in general as a strategy for avoiding sexual risks, such as pregnancy or STDs, for girls or young women?
- 5) How do you think increased widespread access to the Internet has influenced women's experiences of sexual pleasure? Can you give us an example?
- 6) Is there anything else you would like to say about the article you read or today's discussion?

Before we end today, we would like you to complete this short questionnaire. Please do NOT put your name on the questionnaire. We want to keep this information anonymous.

Thank you for your participation!

APPENDIX C

“VIBRATORS CARRY THE CONVERSATION” NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE

*The New York Times*  
April 20, 2011

# Vibrators Carry the Conversation

By HILARY HOWARD

TOOTHPASTE? Check. Tampons? Check. Vibrator? Check!

For years, vibrators were bought quietly in sex shops, and later online, arriving in discreet unmarked packages. They were rarely discussed, other than perhaps during a late-night girl-talk session fueled by many glasses of pinot grigio. But now you can find them advertised on MTV and boldly displayed at Duane Reade, Walgreens and other mainstream drugstores, mere steps from the Bengay and Dr. Scholl's.

The newest model on the shelves is the Tri-Phoria (\$39.99), created by the condom company Trojan after a study the company conducted in 2008 in partnership with the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University revealed that over half of American women had used vibrators, and of that group, nearly 80 percent had shared them with their partners. James Daniels, vice president for marketing at Trojan, said: "The idea really came from consumers. They kept telling us vibrators, vibrators. And we just laughed. And then we realized they were serious."

The Tri-Phoria joins the A:Muse Personal Pleasure Massager by LifeStyles, which arrived in stores in January, and the Allure, by Durex, which made its over-the-counter debut in 2008; both models are \$19.99. Alan Cheung, senior brand manager for Durex, said that sales of the company's vibrating products are up 60 percent over the last six months, compared with the same period last year. "Consumers are definitely not shy about this kind of purchase in the retail environment," he said.



*Caption: Various personal massage devices line the shelves of a Duane Reade store in New York.*

This comes as no surprise to Rachel Venning, a founder of Babeland, a chain of sex-toy stores that opened a store in family-friendly Park Slope, Brooklyn, in 2008 to nary a ripple of protest. "I know women will buy them at Duane Reade, and as a lifelong cheerleader for sexual empowerment I'm thrilled at this development," Ms. Venning said. "It's one more step in the evolution of vibrators to just another consumer product, unburdened of its freight of shame, sexual defect and sluttiness."

Liz Canner, who directed the 2009 documentary "Orgasm Inc.," agrees. Her film confronted pharmaceutical companies that suggested women were dysfunctional, and

therefore needed some sort of medicinal or therapeutic help, if they could not climax during sex. “It’s easier in a repressed culture to have a disorder than go to a sex store and get a vibrator,” Ms. Canner said in a recent interview. “Vibrators have been shown to enhance sexual pleasure for over 100 years now. Why not partake?”

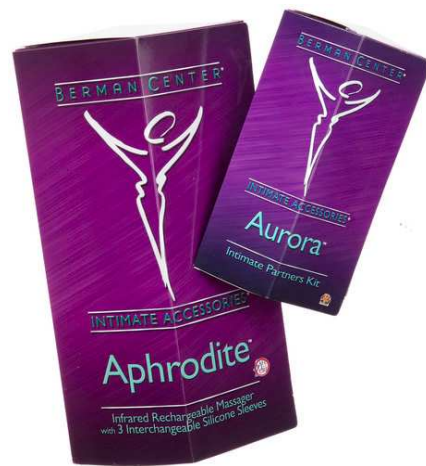
Vibrators made occasional cultural cameos in the 1990s, with scenes in films like “She’s the One” and “Slums of Beverly Hills.” But it wasn’t until an episode of HBO’s “Sex and the City” —called “The Turtle and the Hare,” featuring an actual device called the Rabbit Pearl — that the vibrator truly emerged from the nightstand drawer.

“ ‘Sex and the City’ did as much for women’s sexual comfort as really anything has done in the past couple of decades,” said Dr. Laura Berman of “In the Bedroom with Dr. Laura Berman,” on OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network.

Dr. Berman, a prominent sex and relationship expert, also has a line of sex toys (drlauraberman.com), which she said grossed \$5 million in 2010, up from \$100,000 in 2005. After one appearance on “Oprah” that focused on adult women who had problems climaxing, one of her top-selling products, the Aphrodite, “was back-ordered forever,” she said. And in 2006 she sparked a national debate when she encouraged mothers to buy vibrators for their teenage daughters. “If she gets hot and bothered on a date,” Dr. Berman said about the daughter, “she can go home and self-stimulate, instead of getting pregnant.”

(Of course, a plastic battery-powered device is not needed for self-stimulation, but there is no market potential in that idea.)

Assessing the vibrator’s current ubiquity, Dr. Berman said, “Women are getting less and less caught up on an unrealistic and puritanical vision of what a good girl is. When they can embrace their self-stimulation, they can take ownership of their sexuality.”



*Caption: Dr. Berman on her television talk show with a couple (left). Two items from Dr. Berman’s product line (right).*

Men interviewed proclaimed themselves not only unthreatened by the addition of accessories to their partners’ sex lives, but downright enthusiastic. Jeremy, 31, a content strategist in the entertainment business who lives in New York and wanted his last name

omitted for privacy, said, “From my perspective, a woman who has thoroughly explored her own body, both alone and with or without whichever toys she finds interesting, makes for a significantly better lover.”

Kate, 29, a programming coordinator in New York who has been Jeremy’s girlfriend for a year and a half, calls herself “an evangelist for vibrators.” In college, she recalled seeing a Hello Kitty-themed one. “I wanted it just because it was kitschy and cool,” she said. “I thought it was so ridiculous that I ended up doing a bit more research and started to take it seriously.”

Kate, a devoted Babeland customer, said that at one point she asked her friends to pool their money and buy her a fancy vibrator for her birthday, which she promised to review for them. And when Lou, 44, who lives on Long Island and has been married to Sarah, 47, for 20 years, was found to have prostate cancer, he used a make-your-own vibrator kit to make a mold of himself for his wife before having surgery.

“It never entered my mind that, oh, my God, this was bad,” he said.

Carol Queen, who is the curator of the Antique Vibrator Museum and a staff sexologist for Good Vibrations, a sex-toy retailer since 1977 that bills itself as the “original clean well-lit place to buy vibrators,” attributes more-honest discussions about sex and pleasure to fear of H.I.V./AIDS in the early 1990s, which led to frank discussions about condoms. She also mentioned a shift in published erotica at that time.

“There was something of a pendulum swing from the sex conservatism of the ’80s to the lively sex publishing of the ’90s, zines, anthologies, small presses,” she said. “Then people in more-mainstream venues heard about toys. As soon as mainstream culture looks at an issue, it becomes fair game for everyone else.”

And now, thanks to Suki Dunham, 43, vibrators also have an iPhone app.

Ms. Dunham, a former business manager for Apple, was a stay-at-home mother for four years before founding OhMiBod, a line of vibrators that synchronize rhythmically with iPods, iPads, iPhones and other smartphones. (But, she said, “Our product line won’t be sold at the Apple store any time soon.”) She got the idea after her husband, Brian, who was then traveling frequently for his job at Tyco, gave her an iPod and a vibrator for Christmas.

He later quit to help his wife market her invention, which has faced some hurdles. Nylon Magazine refused to run an ad, Ms. Dunham said. And the federal Small Business Administration denied her loan application because they said she ran a “prurient” business.

“I can sit with my 10-year-old daughter during prime-time TV and watch a commercial for Viagra,” Mr. Dunham said, “but I can’t advertise our OhMiBod fan page within Facebook.”

OhMiBod’s Freestyle :G is more expensive than the drugstore versions, at \$120, a price comparable to other models from Jimmyjane, Lelo and Je Joue. Perhaps the top of the line is the Lelo Inez, which for \$13,500 offers a “virtually silent” engine, according to the company, and either a 18-karat gold-plated or stainless steel finish.

But inconspicuous consumption remains the industry standard. Dr. Berman said she packages her toys in what look like “perfume boxes.” Trojan offers a discreet lavender box. Passion Parties is a direct sales company that offers products at in-home parties, during which women place orders with a salesclerk in a private room. “We don’t have a porn star on the package. To us that’s just degrading,” said Pat Davis, the company president. “There is still a strong desire for the confidentiality of it.”

The ability to shop online has surely helped the rising popularity of vibrators; Good Vibrations’s business has grown by 60 percent since the ’90s. “I am all about the Internet,” said Ellie, 32, a student and Babeland customer in Old Town, Me. “People want them, but they don’t want to go to the creepy stores with the creepy people.”

But the creep factor has also decreased significantly since vibrators began to be portrayed in popular culture. Dr. Berman’s vibrating panties appeared in the 2009 movie “The Ugly Truth,” starring Katherine Heigl and Gerard Butler. “That scene would not have been in a major Hollywood movie 10 years ago,” Dr. Berman said. Her products were also in a recent episode of “Private Practice” on ABC, though they remained in the boxes. And Kandi Burruss, a singer-songwriter and one of Bravo’s “Real Housewives of Atlanta,” has decided to create a line of vibrators with Ms. Dunham’s help.

The history of the device is an ongoing source of fascination. In a poke at early 1960s prudishness, an episode in the first season of “Mad Men” featured a wired girdle called the Electrosizer. Sarah Ruhl’s critically acclaimed 2009 Broadway play, “In the Next Room (or the vibrator play),” explored the socio-cultural reasons behind the invention of the vibrator, which was to treat “hysterical” women medically, in the 1880s.

And “Hysteria,” a romantic comedy in post-production that will star Maggie Gyllenhaal and Hugh Dancy, will recount the same point in Victorian history. The plot revolves around Mr. Dancy’s character, a young earnest doctor who takes a job massaging women’s pelvises into “paroxysms.” But when the doctor develops carpal tunnel syndrome, his best friend (Rupert Everett), who is obsessed with electricity, invents a device that has impressively efficient curative powers.

“Americans are ready to laugh at the vibrator as a medical device,” said Tanya Wexler, the director of “Hysteria,” whose movie takes a winking look at what Ms. Canner alludes to in her documentary: the medical treatment of women who aren’t perfectly orgasmic — about which Ms. Wexler feels similarly perplexed.

“People don’t need doctors for it,” she said “They just need a little bit of freedom.”



APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

## SEXUALITY QUESTIONNAIRE

SUBJECT IDENTIFIER: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

INSTRUCTIONS: These questions ask about your sexual feelings, attitudes, and experiences. Please answer the following questions as honestly and clearly as possible. Your responses will be kept completely confidential. This questionnaire should take about 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

CIRCLE ONLY ONE RESPONSE PER QUESTION

### PART I:

The first set of questions asks about your sexual feelings and responses during the past 4 weeks. In answering these questions the following definitions apply:

Sexual activity can include caressing, foreplay, masturbation, and vaginal intercourse.

Sexual intercourse is defined as penile penetration (entry) of the vagina.

Sexual stimulation includes situations like foreplay with a partner, self-stimulation (masturbation), or sexual fantasy.

Genitals are your sexual organs, including the labia, clitoris, and vagina.

*Sexual desire or interest is a feeling that includes wanting to have a sexual experience, feeling receptive to a partner's sexual initiation, and thinking or fantasizing about having sex.*

- 1) Over the past 4 weeks, how **often** did you feel sexual desire or interest?
  - a. Almost always or always
  - b. Most times (more than half the time)
  - c. Sometimes (about half the time)
  - d. A few times (less than half the time)
  - e. Almost never or never
  
- 2) Over the past 4 weeks, how would you rate your **level** (degree) of sexual desire or interest?
  - a. Very high
  - b. High
  - c. Moderate
  - d. Low
  - e. Very low or none at all

*Sexual arousal is a feeling that includes both physical and mental aspects of sexual excitement. It may include feelings of warmth or tingling in the genitals, lubrication (wetness), or muscle contractions.*

- 3) Over the past 4 weeks, how **often** did you feel sexually aroused ("turned on") during sexual activity or intercourse?
  - a. No sexual activity
  - b. Almost always or always
  - c. Most times (more than half the time)

- d. Sometimes (about half the time)
  - e. A few times (less than half the time)
  - f. Almost never or never
- 4) Over the past 4 weeks, how would you rate your **level** of sexual arousal (“turn on”) during sexual activity or intercourse?
- a. No sexual activity
  - b. Very high
  - c. High
  - d. Moderate
  - e. Low
  - f. Very low or none at all
- 5) Over the past 4 weeks, how **confident** were you about becoming sexually aroused during sexual activity or intercourse?
- a. No sexual activity
  - b. Very high confidence
  - c. High confidence
  - d. Moderate confidence
  - e. Low confidence
  - f. Very low or no confidence
- 6) Over the past 4 weeks, how **often** have you been satisfied with your arousal (excitement) during sexual activity or intercourse?
- a. No sexual activity
  - b. Almost always or always
  - c. Most times (more than half the time)
  - d. Sometimes (about half the time)
  - e. A few times (less than half the time)
  - f. Almost never or never
- 7) Over the past 4 weeks, how **often** did you become lubricated (“wet”) during sexual activity or intercourse?
- a. No sexual activity
  - b. Almost always or always
  - c. Most times (more than half the time)
  - d. Sometimes (about half the time)
  - e. A few times (less than half the time)
  - f. Almost never or never

- 8) Over the past 4 weeks, how **difficult** was it to become lubricated (“wet”) during sexual activity or intercourse?
- No sexual activity
  - Extremely difficult or impossible
  - Very difficult
  - Difficult
  - Slightly difficult
  - Not difficult
- 9) Over the past 4 weeks, how **often** did you maintain your lubrication (“wetness”) until completion of sexual activity or intercourse?
- No sexual activity
  - Almost always or always
  - Most times (more than half the time)
  - Sometimes (about half the time)
  - A few times (less than half the time)
  - Almost never or never
- 10) Over the past 4 weeks, how **difficult** was it to maintain your lubrication (“wetness”) until completion of sexual activity or intercourse?
- No sexual activity
  - Extremely difficult or impossible
  - Very difficult
  - Difficult
  - Slightly difficult
  - Not difficult
- 11) Over the past 4 weeks, when you had sexual stimulation or intercourse, how **often** did you reach orgasm (climax)?
- No sexual activity
  - Almost always or always
  - Most times (more than half the time)
  - Sometimes (about half the time)
  - A few times (less than half the time)
  - Almost never or never
- 12) Over the past 4 weeks, when you had sexual stimulation or intercourse, how **difficult** was it for you to reach orgasm (climax)?

- a. No sexual activity
  - b. Extremely difficult or impossible
  - c. Very difficult
  - d. Difficult
  - e. Slightly difficult
  - f. Not difficult
- 13) Over the past 4 weeks, how **satisfied** were you with your ability to reach orgasm (climax) during sexual activity or intercourse?
- a. No sexual activity
  - b. Very satisfied
  - c. Moderately satisfied
  - d. About equally satisfied and dissatisfied
  - e. Moderately dissatisfied
  - f. Very dissatisfied
- 14) Over the past 4 weeks, how **satisfied** have you been with the amount of emotional closeness during sexual activity between you and your partner?
- a. No sexual activity
  - b. Very satisfied
  - c. Moderately satisfied
  - d. About equally satisfied and dissatisfied
  - e. Moderately dissatisfied
  - f. Very dissatisfied
- 15) Over the past 4 weeks, how **satisfied** have you been with your sexual relationship with your partner?
- a. Not applicable
  - b. Very satisfied
  - c. Moderately satisfied
  - d. About equally satisfied and dissatisfied
  - e. Moderately dissatisfied
  - f. Very dissatisfied
- 16) Over the past 4 weeks, how **satisfied** have you been with your overall sexual life?
- a. Very satisfied
  - b. Moderately satisfied
  - c. About equally satisfied and dissatisfied

- d. Moderately dissatisfied
- e. Very dissatisfied

17) Over the past 4 weeks, how **often** did you experience discomfort or pain during vaginal penetration?

- a. Did not attempt intercourse
- b. Almost always or always
- c. Most times (more than half the time)
- d. Sometimes (about half the time)
- e. A few times (less than half the time)
- f. Almost never or never

18) Over the past 4 weeks, how **often** did you experience discomfort or pain following vaginal penetration?

- a. Did not attempt intercourse
- b. Almost always or always
- c. Most times (more than half the time)
- d. Sometimes (about half the time)
- e. A few times (less than half the time)
- f. Almost never or never

19) Over the past 4 weeks, how would you rate your **level** (degree) of discomfort or pain during or following vaginal penetration?

- a. Did not attempt intercourse
- b. Very high
- c. High
- d. Moderate
- e. Low
- f. Very low or none at all

**QUESTIONNAIRE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE**

**PART II:**

Next, you will read a series of statements about your body and sexuality. Please read each item carefully and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement by circling the number that corresponds to the following scale:

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>1) It bothers me that I'm not better looking</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>2) It is okay for me to meet my own sexual needs through self-masturbation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>3) If a partner were to ignore my sexual needs and desires, I'd feel hurt</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>4) I would not hesitate to ask for what I want sexually from a romantic partner</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>5) I spend time thinking and reflecting about my personal experiences</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>6) I worry that I am not sexually desirable to others</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>7) I believe self-masturbating can be an exciting experience</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>8) It would bother me if a sexual partner neglected my sexual needs and desires</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>9) I am able to ask a partner to provide the sexual stimulation I need</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>10) I rarely think about the sexual aspects of my life</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>11) Physically, I am an attractive person</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>12) I believe self-masturbation is wrong</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>13) I would expect a sexual partner to be responsive to my sexual needs and feelings</b>	1	2	3	4	5

<b>14) If I were to have sex with someone, I'd show my partner what I want</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>15) I think about my sexuality</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
	1	2	3	4	5
<b>16) I am confident that a romantic partner would find me sexually attractive</b>					
<b>17) I think it is important for a sexual partner to consider my sexual pleasure</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>18) I don't think about my sexuality very much</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>19) I am confident that others will find me sexually desirable</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>20) My sexual behavior and experiences are not something I spend time thinking about</b>	1	2	3	4	5

**PART III:**

Next, you will read four statements about your genitals. Please read each item carefully and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement by circling the number that corresponds to the following scale:

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Agree
- 4 = Strongly agree

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
	1	2	3	4
<b>1) I am satisfied with the appearance of my genitals</b>				
<b>2) I would feel comfortable letting a sexual partner look at my genitals</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>3) I think my genitals smell fine</b>	1	2	3	4
<b>4) I am not embarrassed about my genitals</b>	1	2	3	4

**QUESTIONNAIRE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE**



**PART IV:**

On the next two pages a number of body parts and functions are listed. Please read each item carefully and indicate how you feel about this part or function of your own body using the following scale:

- 1 = Have strong negative feelings
- 2 = Have moderate negative feelings
- 3 = Have no feeling one way or another
- 4 = Have moderate positive feelings
- 5 = Have strong positive feelings

	<b>Strong Negative Feelings</b>	<b>Moderate Negative Feelings</b>	<b>No Feelings</b>	<b>Moderate Positive Feelings</b>	<b>Strong Positive Feelings</b>
<b>1) Body scent</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>2) Appetite</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>3) Nose</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>4) Physical stamina</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>5) Reflexes</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>6) Lips</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>7) Muscular strength</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>8) Waist</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>9) Energy level</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>10) Thighs</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>11) Ears</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>12) Biceps</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>13) Chin</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>14) Body build</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>15) Physical coordination</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>16) Buttocks</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>17) Agility</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>18) Width of shoulders</b>	1	2	3	4	5

	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>Strong Negative Feelings</b>	<b>Moderate Negative Feelings</b>	<b>No Feelings</b>	<b>Moderate Positive Feelings</b>	<b>Strong Positive Feelings</b>
19) Arms	1	2	3	4	5
20) Chest or breasts	1	2	3	4	5
21) Appearance of eyes	1	2	3	4	5
22) Cheeks/ cheekbones	1	2	3	4	5
23) Hips	1	2	3	4	5
24) Legs	1	2	3	4	5
25) Figure or physique	1	2	3	4	5
26) Sex drive	1	2	3	4	5
27) Feet	1	2	3	4	5
28) Sex organs	1	2	3	4	5
29) Appearance of stomach	1	2	3	4	5
30) Health	1	2	3	4	5
31) Sex activities	1	2	3	4	5
32) Body hair	1	2	3	4	5
33) Physical condition	1	2	3	4	5
34) Face	1	2	3	4	5
35) Weight	1	2	3	4	5

**QUESTIONNAIRE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE**

**PART V:**

Thank you for completing the multiple-choice portion of this questionnaire. In this final section, you have the opportunity to provide any additional information or comments you would like to share based on today's discussion. In addition, you will be asked to briefly reflect on what it was like for you to participate in this session.

1) Additional information or comments:

2) Reflection on the experience of participating in today's discussion

## Demographic Questionnaire

*Please fill in:*

1) My age: \_\_\_\_\_

2) My sex: \_\_\_\_\_

3) My sexual orientation: \_\_\_\_\_

4) My religion: \_\_\_\_\_

5) My college major: \_\_\_\_\_

6) Where I (mostly) grew up: \_\_\_\_\_

7) My political affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

8) My race or ethnicity (circle one):

*a) White*

*b) Black or African-American*

*c) Hispanic*

*d) Asian*

*e) Other* \_\_\_\_\_

9) My current employment status (circle all that apply):

*a) Employed full-time*

*b) Employed part-time*

*c) Full-time student*

*d) Part-time student*

*e) Unemployed*

*f) Other* \_\_\_\_\_

10) Highest educational degree completed by my mother (circle one):

*a) Did not finish high school*

*b) High school diploma or GED*

*c) Some college*

*d) Bachelors degree*

*e) Graduate degree*

11) My mother's occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

12) Highest educational degree completed by my father (circle one):

*a) Did not finish high school*

*b) High school diploma or GED*

- c) Some college*
- d) Bachelors degree*
- e) Graduate degree*

13) My father's occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX E  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*I'm going to start the interview by asking you a few questions about yourself and how you grew up.*

1. How old are you?
2. What is your major?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. What is your current occupation? Are you a student? Do you work? Both?
5. Who did you grow up with?
  - a. How far did they go in school?
  - b. What do they do for a living?
6. What is your race or ethnicity?
7. What religion, if any, were you raised in?
  - a. Nature of church, temple etc.?
8. What religion, if any, do you belong to now?
  - a. On a scale of one to five, with one being not at all religious and five being extremely religious, how religious would you say you are? Explain.
9. How would you describe your political beliefs or affiliation?

*The next set of questions will ask about your experiences with sexual and health education.*

1. What, if anything, do you remember learning about sexuality in school? In church, temple, etc.? From your parents? From your friends? From popular media (such as TV, movies, magazines, music, internet, etc.)?
  - a. Your body?
  - b. Looking back now, is there anything particular that you wish you had learned about sexuality? Your body specifically?
  - c. What do you think makes a sexual activity or certain sexual behavior "healthy" or "unhealthy"?
    - i. "Risky" or "not risky"? Explain.
    - ii. How have your ideas about what is "risky" changed since you were younger?
  - d. Thinking back, how do you think the way you were raised influences how you think about sexual health?
    - i. Ethnicity or nationality specifically? Religion?
    - ii. Have you ever experienced a conflict between the way you think about sexual health and the way you were raised?
2. What do you remember learning about sexual pleasure in school? In church, temple, etc.? From your parents? From your peers? From popular media (such as TV, movies, magazines, music, internet, etc.)?
  - a. Looking back now, is there anything that you wish you had learned about sexual pleasure?
  - b. How has your knowledge about sexual pleasure changed over time? Your experience of sexual pleasure?
  - c. Thinking back, how do you think the way you were raised influences how you think about sexual pleasure?
    - i. Nationality or ethnicity specifically? Religion?
    - ii. Have you ever experienced a conflict between the way you think about sexual pleasure and how you were raised?
  - d. How do you think popular culture, such as movies, TV, music, etc. has influenced how you think about sexual pleasure?

3. Do you ever do anything to prevent getting pregnant? To prevent getting infected with HIV or herpes or another sexually transmitted disease? Explain.
  - a. IF YES: In what ways, if at all, do you think that taking steps to protect yourself from pregnancy and/or disease affects your sexual experience(s)?
    - i. Sexual pleasure? Power?
  - b. IF NO: Have you ever tried to take steps to protect yourself from pregnancy or disease?
    - i. Even though you do not currently take steps to protect yourself from pregnancy or disease, do you want to?
    - ii. In what ways, if at all, do you think that NOT taking steps to protect yourself from pregnancy or disease affects your sexual experience(s)?
      1. Sexual pleasure? Power?
  - c. Thinking back, how do you think the way you were raised influences how you think about protecting yourself against pregnancy or disease?
    - i. Ethnicity or nationality specifically? Religion?
    - ii. Have you ever experienced a conflict between the way you think protection against pregnancy or disease and the way you were raised?

*The next set of questions asks about pleasure.*

1. Tell me about a particularly pleasurable sexual experience.
  - a. Are there specific sexual activities or behaviors that you find particularly pleasurable?
2. Tell me about a particularly not pleasurable sexual experience.
  - a. Are there specific sexual activities or behaviors that you find particularly not pleasurable?
  - b. What makes a sexual activity or certain sexual behavior pleasurable or not?

**ORGASM:**

3. When was the first time you ever heard about women having orgasms? What did you hear?
4. Have you ever had an orgasm alone or with a partner? I know that sometimes a woman can easily tell that she has had an orgasm and sometimes it's less clear.
  - a. IF YES: Tell me about the last time you had an orgasm. (who/what/where/how/why?)
    - i. How does having an orgasm make you feel? Emotionally? Physically?
    - ii. Can you remember a situation where you wanted to have an orgasm, but didn't have one? Explain.
      1. Why did this happen?
      2. How did that make you feel?
  - b. IF NO: Even though you have never had an orgasm, do you think you would like to have one?
    - i. Have you ever tried to help yourself to orgasm?
    - ii. Has your partner ever tried to help you to orgasm?
    - iii. How does it make you feel that you have never had an orgasm?
5. Have you ever faked an orgasm or pretended to be experiencing sexual pleasure when you really were not? Explain. (who/what/where/how/why?)



MASTURBATION:

6. What comes to mind when you think about the term masturbation?
  - a. *EXPLAIN: For the purposes of this interview, let's define masturbation as touching or otherwise stimulating your own breasts, genitals, or other erogenous zones for sexual purposes.*
7. Have any of your friends ever talked with you about masturbation? (Who/what/where?)
  - a. How do the guys you know talk about masturbation?
  - b. How do the girls you know talk about masturbation?
8. Have you ever seen anyone masturbating or heard masturbation talked about in the movies and TV you watch? Magazines or books you read? Explain.
  - a. How accurate do you think these depictions are?
  - b. How do you think these depictions compare with how people act or talk about masturbation in real life?
  - c. How do you think these depictions have influenced how you think about masturbation?
9. Tell me about how you learned about masturbation.
  - a. Tell me about your knowledge about masturbation growing up compared with now.
10. Has anyone in your family ever talked with you about masturbation? Parents?
  - a. Anyone in your religious community?
  - b. Teachers? Youth group leaders?
  - c. Thinking back, how do you think the way you were raised influences how you think about masturbation?
    - i. Have you ever experienced a conflict between the way you think about masturbation and the way you were raised?
11. Have you ever masturbated?
  - a. IF YES: Tell me about the last time you masturbated.
    - i. Where? When?
    - ii. How do you masturbate?
      1. Method? Area stimulated? Toy used?
    - iii. How do you turn yourself on?
      1. What do you think about when you masturbate?
      2. Do you ever have fantasies when you masturbate? Explain.
      3. What changes, if any, has there been in your fantas(ies) over time?
    - iv. Why do you think you masturbate?
    - v. Tell me about a particularly pleasurable masturbation experience.
    - vi. Has there been a change in the way you masturbate since you first began and the way you do now? Explain.
    - vii. Can you remember a situation where you wanted to masturbate, but couldn't? Explain.
      1. How did that make you feel?
    - viii. Do you think you have learned anything useful from masturbating?
      1. In what ways, if at all, do you think masturbating affects what you think or feel about your body?
        - a. Your vagina? Clitoris?
        - b. Your sexual health?
        - c. Your sexual pleasure?

- d. Your sense of self?
  - e. Your relationships?
    - i. Some people have sex only with men, some only with women, and some with both. Which describes your activities best? Has that changed over time? How would you define your orientation?
  - b. IF NO: Have you ever tried?
    - i. IF YES: Why did you stop?
    - ii. IF NO:
      - 1. Do you think you would like it? Explain.
      - 2. Why haven't you done so?
    - iii. Even though you don't masturbate, do you think that masturbation can ever be educational for other girls? What about guys?
12. Have you ever masturbated during sexual activity with a partner?
- a. IF YES: During intercourse? Mutual masturbation?
  - b. IF NO: Even though you have never masturbated during sexual activity with a partner, do you think you would like it?
    - i. IF YES: Why do you think you have never tried it?
13. How do you think your experience of masturbation compares with other girls your age? Explain.
- a. Do you think a lot of girls masturbate?
  - b. Do you think you masturbate more or less than most girls?
  - c. Differently from others?
14. How do you think your experience of masturbation compares with guys your age? Explain.
- a. Do you think a lot of guys masturbate?
  - b. Do you think you masturbate more or less than most guys?
15. Do you talk about masturbation with people you date? People you hook up with? Explain.
16. How do you think that the fact that you do (or do not) masturbate affects whether or not you choose to be in a relationship or 'hook up' situation? Explain.
- a. The amount of control that your partner feels they have in the relationship or 'hook up' situation?
  - b. How do you think, if at all, that this might differ depending on the type of relationship (dating, hook up, etc.)?
  - c. How do you think your life would be different if you did (or did not) masturbate? If you had begun masturbating earlier or later in life?
17. How do you think you would feel if you knew that your sexual partner masturbates? Explain.
18. Does your partner know that you do (or do not) masturbate?
- a. How does he or she feel about that?
19. Can you remember a time that you pleased yourself for someone else?
20. Do you recall ever lying to someone about your masturbation experience (or lack of masturbation experience)?
21. How would you feel about your parents knowing that you masturbate? Your friends?
22. Do you think that the fact that you do (or do not) masturbate has any effect on how in control of your sexuality you feel? How in control of your body you feel?

*In this next section we'll be talking a bit about pornography.*

1. Have you ever watched pornography?
  - a. IF YES: Tell me about your most recent experience with pornography.
    - i. Context? Were you alone or with someone else?
    - ii. What are the main reason(s) you generally watch pornography?
    - iii. How do you generally access pornography?
    - iv. How do you generally decide what kind of pornography to watch?
      1. Do you prefer certain kinds of pornography over others? Explain.
    - v. What do you like about watching pornography? Explain.
    - vi. What do you dislike about watching pornography? Explain.
    - vii. How do you think the pornography you watch affects your sexual behavior? Explain.
    - viii. How do you think the pornography you watch affects your experience of sexual pleasure with a partner? Alone? Explain.
    - ix. How do you think the pornography you watch have affects how you feel about the way your body looks? Explain.
      1. The amount of control you feel you have over your body? Explain.
      2. How you feel about the way your body performs sexually? Explain.
  - b. IF NO: Even though you've never watched pornography, do you think you would like it? Explain.
    - i. IF YES: Why have you never watched it?
2. How do you think your experience (or lack of experience) with pornography compares with other girls your age?
  - a. Do you think that a lot of girls watch pornography?
  - b. Do you think you watch pornography more or less than they most girls?
  - c. What are the main reason(s) that you think girls watch pornography?
3. How do you think your experience (or lack of experience) with pornography compares with guys your age?
  - a. Do you think that a lot of guys watch pornography?
  - b. Do you think you watch pornography more or less than most guys?
  - c. What are the main reason(s) that you think guys watch pornography?
4. Do you think you've learned anything about sex, pleasure, your body, or anything else from pornography?
5. How do you think the way you were raised influences how you think about pornography?
  - a. Ethnicity or nationality specifically? Religion?
  - b. Have you ever experienced a conflict between the way you think about pornography and the way you were raised?
6. How do you think popular culture, such as movies, TV, music, etc. has influenced how you think about pornography?

*Now let's talk a bit about sex toys.*

1. Have you ever used a sex toy such as a vibrator, dildo, etc.?
  - a. IF YES: Tell me about the last time you used one.
    - i. Context? Alone or with partner?
    - ii. Where did you get it?

- iii. What, if anything, did you like about using it? Explain.
    - iv. What, if anything, did you dislike about using it? Explain.
  - b. IF NO: Even though you've never used a sex toy, how do you think you would like using one? Explain.
    - i. Why do you think you have never tried using one?
  - c. How do you think the way you were raised influences how you think about sex toys?
    - i. Ethnicity or nationality specifically? Religion?
    - ii. Have you ever experienced a conflict between how you think about sex toys and how you were raised?
  - d. How do you think popular culture, such as movies, TV, music, etc. has influenced how you think about sex toys?
- 2. Have you ever been to an adult sex store (such as Fascinations)?
  - a. IF YES: Tell me about your last experience there.
    - i. What was your main purpose in going there?
    - ii. Who did you go with?
    - iii. What did you buy?
    - iv. How did it make you feel to be in an adult sex store?
  - b. IF NO: Even though you've never been to an adult sex store, do you think you would like it? Explain.
    - i. IF YES: Why do you think you have never gone to an adult sex store?

*I'm finished with all the questions I wanted to ask you, but before we end the interview is there anything else that you would like to add?*

APPENDIX F  
SEX REFLECTION JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT

## SEX REFLECTION JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT

Although our sexuality is linked to our biology, it is also linked to our society. Sexual behaviors, identities, and norms vary over time and place. Even our ideas about what constitutes the 'biological' aspects of sexuality are socially and historically constructed. Cultural attitudes and practices influence the sexual world, as do individual worldviews and experiences. The power structures configured through racial, classed, and gender-based differences also shape the way that sexuality is defined, expressed, and experienced. Over the course of this semester, we will examine the social context in which female sexuality occurs, asking how our cultural ideas about female sexuality have developed over time, and about the pleasures, dangers, and consequences associated with these changing social norms.

One of the primary goals of this course is to challenge you to examine taken-for-granted beliefs about the naturalness of various sexual phenomena and to deepen your understanding of how various social forces shape people's sexual lives. To this end, you will be asked to keep a journal detailing your personal sexual experiences and feelings over the course of the semester.

*EXAMPLES OF SEXUAL EXPERIENCES INCLUDE (BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO): kissing, fondling, touching genitals, oral sex, penile-vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse, group sex, solo masturbation, partnered masturbation, phone sex, cybersex, sexting, etc.*

You are REQUIRED to write one journal entry per week for the duration of the semester (13 total entries). You do not need to write separate entries for each sexual experience, but rather may combine your reflections into one entry. You **MUST** respond to **ONE** of the following two sets of questions for each of your weekly entries:

A) For weeks that you do **NOT** have any sexual experiences to report, you should think critically about the experience of not engaging in any sexual experiences, by responding to the following questions:

- 1. Did you want to engage in any sexual experiences this week? Why or why not?**
- 2. Did you seek out sexual activity this week? Did you seek to avoid sexual activity this week?**
- 3. How did you feel about this?**

B) For weeks that you **DO** have sexual experiences to report, you should explain **when** and **where** each occurred, the **sequence of events**, and any **other important factors** (i.e. relationship context, sex toys, pornography, fantasy, etc.). You are encouraged to provide as much detail as possible. You should also explain **who** else was involved (if anyone). However, no specific names should be used. Instead, you should use general descriptive terms (i.e. male friend, female friend, boyfriend, girlfriend, wife, husband, friend with benefits, etc.). Thinking critically about each experience, you are expected to reflect on the following questions:

- 1. Did I want to engage in this experience?**
  - a. If yes, explain why. If not, explain why I did so anyway.**

2. **How did this experience make me feel physically?**
3. **How did this experience make me feel emotionally?**
4. **What about this experience was enjoyable or not enjoyable?**
  - a. **Did I say or do anything to try to improve the experience?**
  - b. **How and why (or why not)?**
5. **Did my experience relate to course concepts in any way? How?**

FORMAT: Your journal should be typed and double-spaced. Each entry should be dated. You should include a separate cover page. Your name should NOT be present on any of the journal pages, only on the cover page.

DUE DATES: Your journals will not be collected on a weekly basis. However, you will be required to submit your journal entries in class at 3 different times over the course of the semester as follows:

**Monday, February 13:** 5 entries due (10 points)

**Monday, March 12:** 9 entries due (10 points)

**Monday, April 16:** All 13 entries due (40 points)

Journal submissions will ONLY be accepted IN CLASS on the dates above. Submissions by email will NOT be accepted. However, for the final journal submission due on Monday, April 16, you are also REQUIRED to submit your journal through the anonymous drop box that will be set up on Blackboard. 5 points will be subtracted from your grade for this assignment if you fail to submit your journal through Blackboard. NOTE: Because the submission through Blackboard is anonymous, if you do not submit your journal in class as well, you will not receive any points for your final journal submission!

GRADING: This assignment is worth 60 points. You will not be graded based on the quantity of sexual experiences you include, but rather the detail and quality of your reflections based on the requirements listed in bold above. For the first two deadlines you will earn 10 points each simply for completing and submitting the required number of entries. Your entries will not be graded until the final submission.

#### ALTERNATIVE ASSIGNMENT

If you prefer not to complete the sex reflection journal, you may complete a sex observation journal instead. For this journal, rather than recording your own sexual experiences, you will write about sexual content and gendered messages that you observe around you each week. For example, you might analyze media images, something you've heard others say about sex, an experience in a sex-related or sexualized setting (such as a sex toy or book store, strip club, bar, frat party, sex education classroom, birth control clinic), etc.

For each entry you MUST utilize some of the concepts addressed in class to conduct a critical analysis of a media item, observation, experience, etc. You should examine prevalent social norms, activities, and ideologies as they relate to the management of female or male sexuality. What messages about gender and sexuality are being given? What aspects of intimate relationships and sexual activity are being highlighted? Ignored? What social

scripts appear to be at play? What are the societal consequences of these messages? Some specific concepts you might consider in your analyses are: medicalization of sexuality, compulsory heterosexuality, Heteronormativity, gender essentialism, hegemonic femininity and masculinity, self-objectification theory, sexual citizenship, sexualization of culture, pleasure imperative, heteroflexibility, embodied femininity, sexual regulation, racialized sexualities, sexual double standard, etc.

\*The formatting, grading, and due date requirements are the same for both journals.

**REMINDER: Academic dishonesty and plagiarism will not be tolerated.** ASU defines “Plagiarism” as using another’s words, ideas, materials, or work without properly acknowledging and documenting the source. You can find more details about the university definition for plagiarism at:  
[http://www.asu.edu/studentaffairs/studentlife/judicial/academic\\_integrity.htm#definition](http://www.asu.edu/studentaffairs/studentlife/judicial/academic_integrity.htm#definition)  
[S.](#)



APPENDIX G  
JOURNAL QUESTIONNAIRE

## Demographic Questionnaire

*Please fill in:*

1) My age: \_\_\_\_\_

2) My sex: \_\_\_\_\_

3) My sexual orientation: \_\_\_\_\_

4) My religion: \_\_\_\_\_

5) My college major: \_\_\_\_\_

6) My race or ethnicity (circle one):

- a) White*
- b) Black or African-American*
- c) Hispanic*
- d) Asian*
- e) Other*

7) Highest educational degree completed by my mother (circle one):

- a) None*
- b) High school diploma or GED*
- c) Some college*
- d) Bachelors degree*
- e) Graduate degree*

8) Highest educational degree completed by my father (circle one):

- a) None*
- b) High school diploma or GED*
- c) Some college*
- d) Bachelors degree*
- e) Graduate degree*

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP IRB APPROVAL FORM

**To:** Rose Weitz  
West Hall

**From:** Mark Roosa, Chair   
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 02/15/2012

**Committee Action:** **Exemption Granted**

**IRB Action Date:** 02/15/2012

**IRB Protocol #:** 1202007411

**Study Title:** The Meaning(s) of Masturbation

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

APPENDIX I  
JOURNAL IRB APPROVAL FORM

**To:** Rose Weitz  
West Hall

**From:** Mark Roosa, Chair *sm*  
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 12/05/2011

**Committee Action:** Expedited Approval

**Approval Date:** 12/05/2011

**Review Type:** Expedited F7

**IRB Protocol #:** 1112007159

**Study Title:** Gender and Sexual Pleasure

**Expiration Date:** 12/04/2012

The above-referenced protocol was approved following expedited review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without approval by the Institutional Review Board.

**Adverse Reactions:** If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Soc Beh IRB immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Soc Beh IRB. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given. Please retain a copy of this letter with your approved protocol.