

THE SEX CHRONICLES

The Sex Chronicles:  
Young Women's Recollections of Learning About Sex

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### **Abstract**

There is a pervasive social fear surrounding girls' sexuality. In 2015, Ontario public schools mandated a new version of sex education. There was, and still is, public outcry by many parents over the new curriculum. The concern? We should be protecting children from, and not exposing them to, sexual content. This criticism of the new curriculum highlights the powerful fear around children and sex, and has, in turn, limited the education girls receive about sexual knowledge and pleasure. My research explores how girls in Ontario learn about sex and how this knowledge has influenced their sexual narratives by asking the following questions: When young women at an Ontario University reflect on how and what they learned about sex, what do they recall? How do young women at an Ontario University feel that their learned knowledge about sex has shaped their understanding of their sexual identity, sex lives, sexual desires, and abstinence? My findings highlight that there is a gap between what girls and young women are learning and what they are experiencing. Overall, my thesis advocates for a meaningful and appropriate sex education that provides students – and girls, in particular – with the knowledge they need to make healthy sexual choices. I hope to inspire educators and policy makers to consider the positive implications of a well rounded and practical sex education.

**Key words:** girlhood; discourses of childhood innocence; sexuality; sex education; sexual subjectivity

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Even the most comprehensive sex education classes stick with a woman's internal parts - uteri, tubes, ovaries. Those classic diagrams of a woman's reproductive system, the ones shaped like the head of a steer, blur into a gray Y between the legs, as if the vulva and the labia, let alone the clitoris, don't exist... Where is the discussion of girls' sexual development? When do we talk to girls about desire and pleasure? When do we explain the miraculous nuances of their anatomy? When do we address exploration, self-knowledge?

(Orenstein, 2016)

The opening quote is from Peggy Orenstein's (2016) bestselling book, *Girls & Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape*. An American journalist, Orenstein interviewed 70 high school girls and college-aged young women about their sex lives. Interestingly, throughout the book she notes that a distinct lack of sex education is provided to her participants, many of whom seem to talk about their sexual encounters in very limiting ways. Like Orenstein, I believe there is a gap between what girls are learning about sex and the actual experiences they are having as young women. As a young Canadian woman who grew up in Southern Ontario with my mom, dad, and two siblings, I do not recall many experiences where I learned about sex from my teachers or parents. Although, I recall two vivid memories of sex education I received from my mom and a supply teacher.

The first memory is of a difficult and awkward conversation I had with my mom. It was the summer after grade 10 and I asked her if I could go on birth control. I remember feeling nervous about asking; my mom and I had never talked about sex or the use of birth control. There were two reasons for my request: first, I wanted to regulate my period, which I was getting

twice a month (this is the reason I told my mom); and second, because I was having sex with my boyfriend (which my mom did not know). My mom was not happy that I wanted to go on birth control because “everyone would think I was having sex,” however, with a bit of persuasion she agreed I could go on the pill – although, I was not allowed to tell anyone. This experience taught me two things: first, that I should never talk to my mom about sex because even when she thinks I am not having sex she is freaking out about other people thinking I am having sex; and second, that young people having sex is shameful and sinful and should be kept a secret.

The second experience was in my grade 11 Law class. We had a supply teacher that day and somehow the topic of sex came up and the supply teacher told us “if you are having sex, it is because you are trying to have a baby.” This is when I learned my second sex lesson: sex is not meant for pleasure or young people; sex is an act for reproduction. I remember feeling guilty about my sexual relationship with my boyfriend and also very panicked. Was I pregnant? Was I going to get pregnant? Why were we having sex? We did not want a baby! The experience was very confusing for me, I spent the next year panicking about pregnancy scares, even though I was using two forms of birth control and very unlikely to be able to conceive a child. However, I lacked the education I needed to know I was taking the appropriate precautions.

These two experiences are the sex education lessons I recall from my youth, and as an adult they make me cringe. I learned that sex is not for young people, that it is shameful and sinful, and that only those who want to become pregnant should be having sex. I did not learn about my body, including my sexual needs and desires. I did not learn about consent. I did not learn about pleasure. I did not learn about sexuality. If you are wondering if maybe I just did not pay attention in sex education, I want to share one more story. In teacher’s college, four of my peers and I had to create a lesson on identifying female and male body parts, which is now part

of the Ontario curriculum for grade one (finally!). As we worked together to create a lesson, we realized that none of us could identify the female body parts. Five university-educated, adult females could not identify our own female genitalia. This was a moment of enlightenment for me; I recognized that this was a huge problem, a problem that needed to be addressed. It had me reflecting on the gap between sexual education, and lack thereof, and young women's sexual experiences. What are girls being taught about sex? What are they not being taught? How does this influence the negotiations of their adult sex lives?

I do believe that children today have access to more resources for learning about sex than previous generations. I recall being exposed to sexual content from different media sources, but mostly television, as well as from peers, usually those who had older siblings. However, the information I received from these sources revolved around dating and sexual intercourse. This exposure to sexual beliefs and behaviours was missing an understanding of self-respect, pleasure (for the girl partner), and consent. Thus, I lacked a robust and useful form of sex education.

In North America, there is a common fear of corrupting a child's innocence through exposure to sexual content (Flanagan, 2011; Woodiwiss, 2014). A sexually knowledgeable child is viewed as damaged (Woodiwiss, 2014), while most of society understands children to lack sexuality (Robinson, 2008), often labeling them as asexual (Woodiwiss, 2014). Since society views children as asexual, children who exhibit sexual behaviour or desire are usually thought to be victims of sexual abuse (Flanagan, 2011; Woodiwiss, 2014). As Robinson (2008) states, "[t]here is a permanent state of alert around children, because of their perceived vulnerability to sexual danger" (p.116). Therefore, adults carefully regulate children and deny them access to sexual knowledge for their own 'protection' (Robinson, 2008).

A pervasive social fear in the West surrounding girls' sexuality and girls having sex is why I conducted this research study. I want to create a space for girls and young women to share their narratives of sexual subjectivity, not just sexual objectification, which is typically how young women and sex are represented in media and popular accounts. I hope to highlight how the young women in my study came to learn about sex and understand their sexuality, and how this knowledge relates to their current perceptions and opinions about sex. I believe there is a disconnection between what girls and young women are being taught about sex, whether it be by their parents, schools, or popular media, and how this has shaped their understanding of their sexual identity, sexual desires, and sex life. This gap represents a large part of the story that seems to be missing. In this thesis I will expose this gap by exploring previous literature, as well as sharing the narratives of young women reflecting back on their experiences of learning about sex.

Given these interests, I pursued the following research questions with my participants: When young women at an Ontario University reflect on how and what they learned about sex, what do they recall? How do young women at an Ontario University feel that their learned knowledge about sex has shaped their understanding of their sexual identity, sex lives, sexual desires, and abstinence?

In this chapter, I will outline my theoretical framework by briefly exploring the historical understanding of childhood and how it is defined; then I will delve into the sociology of childhood, followed by an analysis of the dominant discourses of childhood and how childhood innocence unfairly impacts girls; and lastly, I will explore the panopticon effect and its connection to girls' sex subjectivities.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter, I explore why girls do not receive a well-rounded, appropriate sex education. I highlight how adults view children as innocent and how sexual knowledge is an indicator of corrupted innocence (Flanagan, 2011; Woodiwiss, 2014). To have a thorough understanding of the concept of childhood, I will engage a theoretical framework based on the sociology of childhood and its critique of “child,” “childhood,” and other categories that deny young people agency. A sociology of childhood framework will allow me to explore not only how our North American society defines childhood, but also recommendations for a more practical, feminist, and theoretically engaged reflection of how we might begin to understand children outside of this rigid and harmful paradigm of thought.

### **Defining Childhood**

How does society define “child” and “childhood”? Is the concept of childhood universal? Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, it is defined as a young person or as a son or daughter; the word “childhood” is defined as someone or something in the state of development (Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online). These definitions are very vague and do not describe the identifying features of what it means to be a child. Over the years, researchers have attempted to understand the concept of childhood. Within the field of developmental psychology, there are a number of dominant and widely known theories of childhood, such as those by Freud (1905), Piaget (1932), Erikson (1950), and Vygotsky (1978). Developmental psychology theories are based on the “normal” growth of children, mirroring an evolutionary approach to understanding how childhood “naturally” unfolds (Prout & James, 1997).

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) are often referred to as the two most influential developmental psychologists whose theories of child development have had a

profound impact on both the field of psychology and the education system (Lourenço, 2012). Piaget believed that “normal” children progress through a series of four ordered developmental stages: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational (Monney, 2000). Piaget believed that how and when a child progresses through each stage is based on their age and maturity, and thus, childhood development is a universal, generalizable experience. Alongside Piaget, Vygotsky also believed development to be a process, but contrary to Piaget, he believed culture and socialization influenced childhood development (Lourenço, 2012). Vygotsky believed that children’s personal and social experiences could not be separated from one another (Mooney, 2000). Overall, many people believe Vygotsky and Piaget’s theories to be similar despite their differences, as both viewed development as a structured process. Importantly, their theories have widely shaped North American education systems, what is being taught, and how curricula are organized around age based skill sets and cognitive abilities. As Western conceptualizations of education systems are built on the knowledge of development as a structured process, these theories have held enormous sway and power in the lives of young people (Mooney, 2000).

From a sociological perspective, the concept of childhood only became a popular topic of study in the last 30 to 40 years (Corsaro, 2015). Social constructionist theories are challenging developmental models and becoming more widely utilized in critiques of childhood as a static social category. Developmental theorists, such as Piaget and Vygotsky, understand childhood to be a universal experience, but some sociological perspectives suggest that children exist all over the world, but depending where you are, childhood looks and feels very different (Albanese, 2009; Lam, 2012; Ritchie & Koller, 1965). Rather than claims of a universal childhood, a more fluid and contextual understanding of childhood has emerged. This new understanding suggests

that childhood varies across space and time, and is deeply impacted by social, cultural, and historical contexts, as well as global and local economies (Corsaro, 2015). The shifting nature of childhood is evidence that the concepts of “child” and “childhood” are social constructs (Albanese, 2009; Corsaro, 2015). A social constructionist approach to childhood is very different from the more common understanding of childhood through socialization theory. Through a socialization perspective, children are seen as “incomplete” or “in process” (Matthews, 2007).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau philosophized powerful yet opposing views about what children need in order to flourish. Rousseau, a French philosopher, believed children were born free, honest, and innocent, and that children were inherently good. He viewed childhood as separate from adulthood and that all children must be children before they become adults (Jenks, 2005). For Rousseau, childhood represented a perfect state of innocence that needed to be protected at all costs. John Locke, however, believed that children were born blank slates, as *tabula rasas* who must be exposed to experiences in order to grow into good and model citizens (Albanese, 2009). He also claimed that children are entitled to freedom, but that adult authorities must necessarily limit this freedom until the child has developed the skills needed to handle it – in short, until they become an adult (Ferguson, 1984). Thus, both Rousseau and Locke fashioned children to be free, innocent, and empty, completely separate from adults, and in need of surveillance and protection either to preserve their innocence or to ensure that they were not engaging in inappropriate experiences. Rousseau and Locke did not see children as social actors, but as potential outcomes (Matthews, 2007). Although both theorists had different ideas about the nature of childhood, both understood childhood to be a process – a process that should be controlled and monitored by adults (Ferguson, 1984). Their historically powerful theories are very influential frameworks, which contribute to the discourses

of childhood discussed below. Although Locke and Rousseau have shaped societal beliefs and cultural norms, their views are juxtaposed to the more current understand of childhood found within the sociology of childhood framework.

### **Sociology of Childhood**

Prevailing socialization frameworks, such as those by Locke and Rousseau, are an inadequate way to understand the concept of childhood, as they do not view children as competent beings (Matthews, 2007). In the 1980s, the “new” sociology of childhood was developed (Corsaro, 2015; Jenks, 2005; Prout & James, 1997) in reaction to socialization and developmental theories that suggest children should not or could not make good decisions, handle responsibility, or embody legitimate knowledge (Matthews, 2007). It was named the “new” sociology of childhood; now that it is no longer considered to be new, it is referred to simply as the sociology of childhood.

Unlike socialization frameworks that depict childhood as a static state of becoming, the sociology of childhood critiques universal models, such as developmental psychology, through a social constructionist framework (James & Prout, 1997). This way of thinking shows childhood to be a variable connected to other variables, such as gender, “race”, and socioeconomic status, and that it cannot be separated from these intersecting contexts (James & Prout, 1997). Through this lens, childhood is not a singular, universal phenomenon (Albanese, 2009; Corsaro, 2015; Jenks, 2005; Prout & James, 1997; Ritchie & Koller, 1965), but its social, cultural, and historical construction is shown to have a profound impact on how we talk about, treat, and define children. While Prout and James (1997) acknowledge that young people may be less mature than some adults, they argue that maturity/immaturity are social constructs that must be understood within social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape what is valued and disparaged by

particular societies. Often, childhood immaturity is interpreted as vulnerability and incompetence, which are notions that spring from Rousseau and Locke's models of childhood (Lam, 2012). The sociology of childhood aims to deconstruct this interpretation and advocate for children as competent social actors (Prout & James, 1997). Overall, researchers play a large role in critically analyzing the phenomenon of childhood (James & Prout, 1997). Through such analysis, researchers can challenge common-sense assumptions about childhood that create broader sociocultural patterns that work to oppress children and limit what they can do. Childhood demands critique in order to challenge restrictive roles that society has set for young people, including limitations around sex and sexuality.

Given the approach offered by the sociology of childhood, I understand childhood to be a plurality, a shifting construct, and a contextual social location that varies across time and geographical space (Moss & Petrie, 2002). As Moss & Petrie (2002) state, "our construction of childhood and our images of the child represent ethical and political choices made within larger frameworks of ideas, value and rationalities" (p. 55). Moss and Petrie believe that the term "childhood" should always be pluralized to prevent reifying a universal child (Matthew, 2007; Moss & Petrie, 2002). Jenks (2005) further supports this argument by highlighting the variety of children's experiences across locales and time periods. However, despite this framework, there remains a powerful societal view of childhood as a universal, ahistoric, static, and generalizable experience.

### **The Dominant Discourses of Childhood**

The best way to critically analyze the concept of childhood is to consider childhoods within their sociocultural contexts, including societal ideas, cultural norms and values, and localized justifications for treating young people a certain way. This type of critical analysis

helps to unearth the underlying discourses of childhood. There are various definitions and understandings for the concept of discourse, but I draw on the meaning put forward by French historian and social theorist Michel Foucault. Foucault (1969) defines a discourse as “a voice as silent as a breath” (p. 27), but a discourse does not exist because it is spoken, “it’s [a] secret presence” (p. 28). According to Foucault (1969), a discourse is much broader than language; it is a circulating body of knowledge that creates a socially constructed truth. Foucault’s many historical projects (e.g. 1977, 1978) highlight how discourses are produced through the institution of social norms, the inculcation of bodily practices, and the way knowledge becomes entrenched as taken-for-granted common sense (Mchoul & Grace, 2015).

The discourses of childhood are a powerful yet invisible form of social knowledge that constructs and maintains truths about young people that seem to be beyond question in a given sociocultural context (Lam, 2012). These discourses are circulated by individuals vis-à-vis everyday talk, text, and action, and within institutions, such as media, psychiatry, psychology, medicine, law, and families. Foucault emphasizes the importance of studying the *effects* generated by this form of discursive power rather than focusing attention on how or why it was produced (Mchoul & Grace, 2015). Although there are a variety of discourses of childhood, some discourses have a powerful influence over others, which I refer to as the dominant discourses of childhood. When analyzing the dominant discourses of childhood through the sociology of childhood framework – and, in particular how these discourses are gendered – I am able to further explore how these discourses interfere with and limit girls’ access to a realistic sex education, as well as young women’s past and current sexual experiences.

Dominant Western discourses of childhood naturally conflate children and innocence, asexuality, and vulnerability, and view children as “becoming” opposed to “being”. Rooted in

the powerful ideals of Rousseau's "innocent child," this link has become entrenched into our society (Albanese, 2009). Rousseau's understanding of children as born inherently pure has had a profound impact on cultural perceptions of children (Jenks, 2005). His philosophy of childhood has been mirrored by cultural norms, where children are understood as not only innocent, but also in need of protection to maintain this innocence. Many critiques of this static and limiting representation from a social constructionist point of view have been offered (Flanagan, 2011; Surtees, 2005; Woodiwiss, 2014). As Robinson (2008, p 115) notes, innocence has become the "ultimate signifier" of childhood, influencing developmental theories, including those relating to sexuality (Robinson, 2008).

Not surprisingly, the concept of children as innocent is more deeply and widely understood to mean children are sexually innocent (Woodiwiss, 2014) and asexual (Robinson, 2008; Flanagan, 2011; Surtees, 2005). The pervasive Western belief is that children are so innocent that we should not expose them to any knowledge or understanding of sex and sexuality; and any form of sexual knowledge displayed by a child is often viewed as deviant or dangerous. And if a child is sexually knowledgeable or exhibits sexual desire, they are considered abnormal or a victim of abuse (Surtees, 2005; Flanagan, 2011). Contradictorily, in addition to sexual innocence, Western society also understands children to be asexual because they are viewed as having no sexuality – no sexual desire. As Robinson (2008) explains, "children's sexuality within this discourse is read as nonexistent or immature at the most. Thus, sexual immaturity is equated with 'innocence' – considered inherent in the child. Consequently, sexuality becomes the exclusive realm of adults" (p. 116). Within human developmental theories, sexual knowledge and behaviour is a sign of maturity, and therefore limited to

adulthood (Robinson, 2008). This creates a persistent binary between adulthood and childhood, classifying children as asexual, innocent, and vulnerable.

The adult-child binary is not only a result of the dominant discourse of childhood innocence, but also reinforces such discourses, as adults try to control and govern children based on these beliefs. As Western society views children as vulnerable (Lam, 2012), they should, therefore, “be protected through denial of access” (Robinson, 2008, p. 121). Adults want to protect children’s innocence by limiting their exposure to topics that are thought to be too mature for their developmental stage (Robinson, 2008). The construction of children as vulnerable and at-risk intersects with the discourse of parental rights, which suggests that parents have a right to decide what knowledge children should receive and when they should receive it (Robinson, 2008). This adult-child binary shapes and limits social and political decisions being made about children (Lam, 2012), and parents feel it is their right to decide what is in the best interest of *their* child (Riggs, 2006). Lam (2012) argues that, “paradoxically, however, the protectionist approach to children is all too often not really protective, but even counter protective” (p. 153). When adults view children as innocent and vulnerable, they deny them access to knowledge that could protect them or even save their lives. This denial of knowledge ironically may make them more vulnerable (Lam, 2012; Robinson, 2008). For example, by denying children access to sexual knowledge, adults are denying children access to conceptual information, such as self-respect and consent. Therefore, children become more vulnerable to unsafe and unhealthy sexual interactions.

The idea of children as innocent and vulnerable is interconnected with the dominant discourse of children as “becoming”. This idea of “becoming” or being “in process” is rooted in socialization theories of childhood, as previously explored in this chapter. Within this discourse,

“[t]he child is seen as ‘a future adult’ rather than as a ‘young human being’ in his or her own right. This assumption is problematic because the temporal focus necessarily forces us to neglect or dismiss the present everyday realities of being a child” (Uprichard, 2008, p. 304). When a child is understood as “becoming” they are no longer understood as a “being,” which results in the idea that “children are incompetent and that adults are not” (Uprichard, 2008, p. 304). This discourse of childhood impacts how, when, and what kind of information children receive about sex and sexuality; children are not seen as sexual beings and their sex education focuses on how it can shape their sexual beliefs and choices as an adult. In opposition to the dominant discourse of children as “becoming” is the idea of children as “being.” Uprichard (2008) draws on other research to explain the discourse of children as “being” as “...the ‘being’ child does have a past, a present and a future. The ‘being child’ is an actor in his or her own right, situated in the past, present and future” (Uprichard, 2008, p. 306). Taking up the idea of children as “being,” I am employing a sociology of childhood framework as it incorporates the idea that children as competent social actors (Prout & James, 1997).

In my study, I focus on the dominant discourses of childhood innocence, asexuality, vulnerability, and becoming because I believe they are the most prevailing and understood discourses about childhood, and because they relate closely to society’s general understanding of sex education for children and youth. Moreover, they silence the voices of individual children and render childhood a largely powerless state (Woodiwiss, 2014).

### **Gender and the Discourse of Childhood Innocence**

It is important to note that the dominant discourse of childhood innocence is often weighted unequally within Western conceptions of girls and boys. Girls, more often than boys, are assumed to be innocent, especially sexually innocent, and vulnerable in comparison to boys.

Despite this construction of girlhood, Kehily (2012) found that a “discursive repertoire of love, romance, physical attraction and burgeoning biological development informed the girls talk” (p. 259) when studying a group of young girls, thus, highlighting “the myth of sexual innocence” (p. 259). Kehily (2012) deconstructs this myth, drawing on other studies, explaining how media sells the idea of childhood to children and how adults are “the creators and dissemblers of childhood innocence” (p. 261).

An example of how the idea of childhood is sold to children is the American Girl Corporation, which sells books, dolls, clothing and accessories: “They brand girlhood as a period of innocence and state that their mission is to help girls remain girls a little longer” (Marshall, 2009, p. 97). What is interesting about the American Girl brand is that it sells the illusion of agency, as the American Girls go on adventures in the books, but as a participant in Marshall’s (2009) study explains, at the end of each adventure the girl must clean up, put on a dress, and attend the party. Thus, at the end of the day, a girl has a duty to conform to the prescribed responsibilities of “good” girlhood. In Marshall’s (2009) study, participants had an opportunity to compare the more conservative dress and body-shape of the American Dolls to Barbie dolls and Bratz dolls, who traditionally are less clothed and wear more make-up: “Students' reflections suggest that in the world of girls' dolls, there still remains a good girl/bad girl dichotomy. Dolls either look like sex objects or asexual little angels” (p. 105). This good girl/bad girl dichotomy reflects the innocent/sexual binary discussed earlier.

In this thesis, I explore how the discourse of childhood innocence, and more specifically, girlhood innocence, has prevailed within the context of sex education. I believe that when adults construct children as innocent, asexual, and vulnerable, children are denied the appropriate and necessary sexual education. While a study of young men’s understanding of their sex education

is imperative, this thesis focuses specifically on young women's understanding of their sex education and their consequent negotiations of their past and present sex lives. Young men and women are treated differently in relation to sex and sexuality where a sexual double standard often constructs boys as sexual subjects and girls as sexual victims or objects (Orenstein, 2016). There is evidence in Orenstein's study which suggests that not only are young people treated differently based on their gender, but beliefs about their sexual selves differs for both young men and young women. For example, many young women suggest that sex is meant to be satisfying for the male partner but not for the female (Orenstein, 2016). In focusing specifically on young women's recollections of sexual knowledge in relation to their past and current sex lives, I connect gendered and sexist assumptions about girls' innocence to broader sociocultural systems that shape understandings of their sexual subjectivity.

### **The panopticon effect**

Foucault (1972) might argue that the discourse of childhood innocence is not only rooted in our society, but also deeply internalized by children. Because children are treated as innocent, asexual, and at-risk, these powerful constructs become part of young people's peer and self-regulation. Foucault theorizes this form of policing as the effect of the panopticon. The panopticon is Jeremy Bentham's architectural plan for a prison, wherein the building is a circular design with a central guard tower. The design creates a permanent sense of visibility, which results in an omnipresent feeling of surveillance. According to Foucault, this sense of permanent surveillance causes prisoners to self-police their behaviour (Mchoul & Grace, 2015). In Western society, there is a parallel link between Bentham's panopticon and the exercise of power by adults over children. Children feel a sense of permanent surveillance by adults, and this causes them to self-regulate their behaviour.

The panopticon effect is highlighted by Woodiwiss (2014), who conducted a study with women who were sexually abused as children. One of the women, Fiona, self-identified as a victim of child abuse even though she could not recall ever having been abused. However, she did recall participating in the sexual behaviour of masturbation, which she did regularly as a child (Woodiwiss, 2014). I will not devalue her narrative by deciding whether or not she was sexually abused. Instead, I will draw attention to how her narrative demonstrates the power of the discourse of childhood innocence in how we understand children in relation to sex, including our own experiences. Fiona participated in masturbation, just like most children do, and because the discourse of childhood innocence frames this action as a sign of trauma/abuse, deviance, and unchild-like behaviour, her self-policing reframed her memories of masturbation as sexual abuse, including deep feelings of shame. The panopticon effect further emphasizes the binary between adulthood and childhood, which then generates a binary between sexuality and innocence, as children cannot be both innocent and sexual. A child who exhibits sexual thoughts or behaviours can no longer be perceived as innocent and is therefore, not a child – he or she has grown up too fast and has experienced the loss of childhood. The discourses of childhood condemn a child's natural curiosity about their body and sexual behaviours.

### **Power and Discourse**

From a Foucauldian perspective, power is not about hierarchy or oppressive, top-down power; as “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). Foucault (1978) explains that power is omniscient and “it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from

everywhere” (p. 93). Thus, power is always circulating and flowing around us. Foucault’s tactical model of power is understood to be productive, as it produces ideas and knowledges, what we think and how we act; yet, it cannot be traced to an individual subject (Foucault, 1978). When understanding power via discourse, Foucault (1978) states that, “Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (p. 100), and:

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (p. 101).

Within the sociology of childhood framework, I am able to highlight the dominate discourses of childhood, which conflate children with innocence, asexuality, vulnerability and becoming, and in so doing, engage in a point of resistance where the discourses are revealed to be fragile.

I use the sociology of childhood to critique the dominant discourses of childhood and its attending social construction of children, more specifically girls, as innocent, vulnerable and both asexual and sexually innocent. The sociology of childhood understands children to be competent and capable beings (Matthews, 2007), as well as active agents in their own lives (Albanese, 2009). This theoretical framework is juxtaposed to children as innocent, asexual, and vulnerable to “adult” content. I employ this framework in my study because I aim to critique the ways that girls are taught about sex based on the idea that this knowledge will corrupt them or tempt them into “bad” behaviour. I then hope to connect this restriction of knowledge to young women’s understanding of themselves as sexual subjects. Just as feminists, such as Peggy Orenstein and Jessica Valenti, have fought for sex positive discussion for young women, so, too,

am I arguing for advocate for having open and needed conversations about sex with girls and women, as well as recognizing females as sexual without condemning them for their sexuality. I want to give young women an opportunity to share their narratives. When and how did they learn about sex? How do they feel this knowledge or lack of knowledge influenced their sexual beliefs and choices in their sex lives? The sociology of childhood serves as an appropriate framework to address these questions as it challenges the dominant discourses of childhood and values young people as contextual, capable, and active citizens. As young people's narratives have been silenced by the prevailing discourses of childhood, in this thesis I offer a space where young women can share their stories set within a context that advocates for a useful and encompassing sex education for young people.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Sexual Subjectivity Defined

Child and youth sexuality has been a long-standing topic in research and politics (Cheng, Hamilton, Missari, & Ma, 2014). At the heart of that research is sexual subjectivity, a term often used when researching girls' sexual expression and experiences (Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat, & Boislard-Pepin, 2011). Sexual subjectivity is a multidimensional term that can be used to explore the complexities of young women's sexual beliefs and experiences. Sexual subjectivity positions a person as a sexual subject, not a sexual object. To expand on this definition, Schalet (2010) describes sexual subjectivity as the "capacity to be aware of one's sexual feelings, to enjoy sexual desire and pleasure, to conceive of oneself as the subject of one's sexual acts, and to experience a certain amount of control in sexual relationships" (p. 305). This definition is similar to Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006), who conducted a three-part study to create the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (FSSI). Their study identifies the three main elements of sexual subjectivity as: a) sexual body-esteem; b) sexual desire and pleasure; and c) sexual reflection. The first element, sexual body-esteem is defined as a person's self-perception of their sexual attractiveness or desirability (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006) or as a person's "positive feelings about the body" (Cheng et al., 2014, p. 928). Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck break down the second element, sexual desire and pleasure, into three subcategories: sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure from self, from a partner, and self-efficacy in sexual desire and pleasure. Lastly, sexual reflection is the ability to reflect on one's sexual beliefs and experiences. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006) created the FSSI with the intention of advancing quantitative research on adolescent sexuality, but I believe the highlighted elements of sexual subjectivity can be translated across all forms of research, including qualitative research.

It has been argued that girls in North America lack sexual subjectivity (Cheng et al., 2014; Schalet, 2010). Schalet (2010) did a cross-cultural examination wherein the experiences of Dutch girls were compared to the experiences of American girls. Her research highlights the binary between innocence and sexuality: “In the American families, girls are required to bifurcate between their roles as good daughters and sexual actors because of the assumed antinomy between the two...” (Schalet, 2010, p. 325). As Caroline, a middle-class girl from the U.S., states: “They [her parents] don’t want to know that I’m doing it. It’s kind of like, ‘Oh my God my little girl is having sex’ kind of thing...It’s really overwhelming for them to know their little girl is in their house having sex with a guy. That is just scary to them” (Schalet, 2010, p.316). In Caroline’s case, her parents knew she was sexually active with her boyfriend, but she still perceived her parents as unaccepting of her sexual choices. This situation is similar to the experiences of another U.S. girl, Michelle, who states that by being sexually active she is stripping herself of the image of being a “perfect little girl.” Their narratives exemplify how complex it is for a girl to have sexual subjectivity, and how it is compromised by the binary between innocence and sexuality described in chapter one. In a study by Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat, and Boislard-Pepin (2011), girls’ sexual subjectivity did not increase with age but with romantic and consensual sexual experiences. Thus, as girls have more sexual experiences, they are better able to understand and view themselves as sexual beings, and therefore develop their sexual subjectivity.

Interestingly, in Schalet’s (2010) study, the Dutch girls had greater sexual subjectivity, which could be the result of better communication about sex with their parents. Some of the Dutch girls did note reservations on their parents’ behalf, but overall, the girls understood that “[they] are able to integrate their sexual maturation into their relationship with their parents”

(Shalet, 2010, p.317). Schalet's study is notable as it also highlights how the adult-child binary varies across cultures – in the U.S., girls' sexuality is often denied or ignored, whereas the Dutch culture is more open and understanding of youth sexuality.

Edwards (2016) suggests that when there is an emphasis on the dangers of sexual behaviours in sex education, they exclude important topics, such as inclusion and pleasure. The hyper focus on the dangers of sex is likely due to the discourse of childhood innocence, where parents perceive children as asexual (Robinson, 2008). The cultural attitude in Western society is that children are too young to be exposed to sexual content and in need of protection from sexual thoughts and behaviours (Robinson, 2008). In Edwards' (2016) study, a young woman who grew up in the 2000s recalls how her parents did not so much talk *with* her about sex but *at* her, “...Instead of having an open discussion about [sex], it was basically ‘don’t do this’ and that was the bottom line...” (Edwards, 2016, p. 270). She further states that what she wanted was an open dialogue about sex with her parents, which would have provided her with information that would have “supported and acknowledged her as a sexual being” (Edwards, 2016, p. 270). Edwards' (2016) participants almost exclusively recall their parents emphasizing the negative consequences of sex and expressed a desire for their parents to include topics such as LGBTQ+, pleasure, and emotional aspects of intimate relationships.

### **Sexual Subjectivity and Minority Groups**

It is important to acknowledge that girls' sexual subjectivity does not just vary across borders, but also varies depending on a person's socioeconomic status (SES), “race” and ethnic background, and sexual orientation. Although my study does not focus specifically on these topics, I cannot ignore the presence of other factors that influence girls and their sexual subjectivity. It would not be possible for me to conduct an exhaustive literature review on sexual

subjectivity and its relation to SES, “race”/ethnic background and the LGBTQ community, within the timeline of my master’s thesis. However, I acknowledge and note the presence of these factors in girls’ experiences.

Cheng et al. (2014) found that in the United States, a person’s socioeconomic status influenced their sexual subjectivity; those who were from working-class backgrounds had less sexual subjectivity than those from middle- to upper middle-class backgrounds. Moreover, they found racial and ethnic backgrounds did contribute to a person’s sexual subjectivity, as Black and Latina girls had lower sexual subjectivity. Latina girls, as well as Asian girls, had the lowest self-efficacy, which means they had the lowest expectation for pleasure in a sexual encounter (Cheng et al., 2014). In a study by Oliver et al. (2015), it was found that Indigenous women are hypersexualized while also expected to be sexually silent, which has “...serious implications for the development of healthy sexuality...” (Oliver et al., 2015, p. 913).

Kubik et al. (2009) examined the historical oppression of Aboriginal women in Canada and state that a “factor that leads to sexual victimization of First Nation women is the continued dominance of negative stereotypes of First Nations women as ‘squaw’, ‘princess’, or ‘sexually promiscuous’ which were historically perpetuated by European colonizers” (p. 26), and more so, “the media disseminates the ideology of the subservient and sexually available Aboriginal women leading to the internalization of colonial stereotypes and offers a cultural justification of sexual violence against Aboriginal women” (Martin-Hill in Kubik et al., 2009, p. 26). It is important to note that I recognize the diversity in culture, language, and geography of various First Nation groups across Canada, yet “[t]heir shared history of colonisation, however, creates a common thread among many communities and peoples” (Oliver et al., 2015, p. 907). The everyday and structurally entrenched oppression that Aboriginal women in Canada face is deeply

rooted in colonization. Oliver et al., (2015) explain that before colonization, “there was respect for all genders, including Two Spirit and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender peoples. This aspect of life was quashed by patriarchal European policies and laws, which encouraged the dominance of men over women for the purposes of settlement” (p. 910). Thus, the hypersexualization of Aboriginal women is due to colonialism and continued perpetuation of this oppression, which significantly influences Aboriginal women’s sexual subjectivity.

In summary, Cheng et al. (2014) concludes that a person’s lower sexual subjectivity is due to their socioeconomic standing and religious background, and not directly related to their “race”. Unlike, Cheng et al. (2014), I think we cannot determine whether it is “race”, SES, or religion that most influences a person’s sexual subjectivity, but it is important to note that *all* of these factors intersect to influence a girls’ sexual subjectivity. I will further explore the intersections of “race”, religion, and SES in relation to sexual subjectivity via an exploration of sex education in later sections.

Although a lot of literature defines sexual subjectivity and explores it across borders, nationalities, and classes, Cheng et al. (2014) highlight how sexual subjectivity has rarely been examined from a long-term perspective: “There is little empirical evidence of how early sexual attitude and development shape young adult experiences” (p. 519). I aim to contribute to this oversight in my thesis by exploring how young women learned about sex when they were girls and how they think this sexual education – whether formal or informal – has shaped their sexual experiences. Although I did not conduct a longitudinal study, I gained insight into girls’ sexual subjectivity over time as young women recalled how they learned about sex and their sexual experiences, or lack of sexual experiences, both in the past and currently. Sexual subjectivity serves as a protective factor, not just of a person’s health, but of their ability to negotiate sexual

experiences (Cheng et al., 2014). As such, my research will contribute to discussions surrounding consent, agency, desire, and other important issues connected to young women's sexual subjectivity.

### **The Missing Discourse of Desire**

Controversy over sex education has a long history in North America. Fine (1988) notes that the hostility towards sex education is because people believe "...sex education raises questions of promoting promiscuity and immorality, and of undermining family values" (Fine, 1988, p 30). In the 1980s, Fine found that in the United States, sex education suppressed women's sexuality and framed women as sexual victims, exposing how the discourse of desire is missing from the curriculum:

One finds an unacknowledged social ambivalence about female sexuality which ideologically separates the female sexual agent, or subject from her counterpart, the female sexual victim. The adolescent woman of the 1980s is constructed as the latter (Fine, 1988, p. 30).

This evaluation of sex education is critical to note as almost 30 years later, we might ask whether much has changed. In 2002, Tolman (2002) found that girls are still denied sexual subjectivity, as they are "not allowed" to feel, know about, or act on sexual desire, as "[t]eenage girls continue to be denied entitlement to their own sexuality" (p. 7). Tolman and Fine argue that girls are taught to see themselves as sexual objects, not subjects (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002), wherein, desire is silenced (Fine, 1988). Fine (1988) explains the relationship between sex education and sexuality subjectivity:

This is not to say that the silencing of a discourse of desire is the primary root of sexual victimization, teen motherhood, and the concomitant poverty experienced by young and

low-income females. Nor could it be responsibly argued that interventions initiated by public schools could ever be successful if separate from economic and social development. But it is important to understand that by providing education, counseling, contraception, and abortion referrals, as well as meaningful educational and vocational opportunities, public schools could play an essential role in the construction of the female subject — social and sexual (p. 50).

Fine concludes that a comprehensive sex education program has the potential to foster sexual subjectivity, and therefore, encourage safer and healthier sexual beliefs and choices.

Since Fine's famous article on the missing discourse of desire, there has been a growing interest in girls and sexuality. In the twenty-first century – after Fine's article brought the issue into the academic spotlight – much research on sexual subjectivity continues to put emphasis on desire (Schalet, 2010), with a focus on the question, is the discourse of desire still missing in sex education?

### **Sexual Subjectivity in Sex Education: Is Desire still missing?**

Sexual subjectivity is the essence of one's ability to make healthy decisions, both physically and emotionally, in relation to one's sexual experiences and beliefs. Thus, it is important to understand how sexual subjectivity is learned, or not, in schools. Allen (2008) conducted a study in New Zealand wherein young people were asked what they wanted in a sex education program. Based on her findings, Allen concludes that sex education in New Zealand fails to acknowledge the realities of young people's experiences and therefore also fails to engage and inform students. It is important for implementers of sex education to view children and youth as both active agents and accomplished decision-makers, capable of making good judgements about their own beliefs and behaviours.

Allen's (2008) study was conducted with 16-19 year-olds who participated in focus groups that gave them a voice to advocate for what they want in a sex education program. The most common theme to emerge was pleasure: the youth wanted to be educated on "how to make sexual activity more enjoyable for both partners" (Allen, 2008, p. 578). This speaks directly to sexual subjectivity. Further, they wanted to know about topics like abortion, teenage parenthood, break-ups, and the range of emotions experienced in a relationship (Allen, 2008). Currently, adults control what is being taught in sex education and when it will be taught (Allen, 2005). But in another of Allen's (2005) studies, students' "suggestions for improving sexuality education challenge schools to revisit their constitution of student sexuality" (p. 390). Although New Zealand's sex education varies slightly from Ontario's curriculum, the results of Allen's study allude to what their curriculum lacks and it resembles what is also missing from Ontario's curriculum. Participants wanted to be equipped with the knowledge they need to make sexual choices and have sexual agency. Connell (2005) examines the previous Ontario sex education program and how sexual danger and pleasure are represented. She explores how the curriculum emphasises the risks involved in sexual activity, its subliminal encouragement of abstinence, and the lack of mention of desire and pleasure. These findings align with Allen's (2005, 2008), and bring attention to how certain sex education curriculums suppress sexual subjectivity:

It can be argued that the prevailing discourses of victimization and individual morality and concomitant preoccupation with abstinence, the consequences of sex, rigid gender roles, socially constructed definitions of sexual health and omission of some issues has resulted in a silencing of desire (Connell, 2005, p. 263).

The curriculum acts as a barrier to sexual subjectivity, as opposed to a step towards greater sexual subjectivity – which some may argue should be its main goal. Although Connell's

findings are compelling, they are out-dated as the curriculum was updated in 2015 in an attempt to be more inclusive of current and silenced issues, such as consent, sexual orientation, and sexting (Ontario, 2015). The inclusivity of these topics is a step in the right direction, but I believe there is still room for improvement.

In addition to research on sex education curriculum, there is research that explores the role of the teacher in relation to teaching sexual subjectivity. How a teacher interprets the curriculum and discusses its content with the class can very much alter the message being taught, for example, when a teacher addresses sexual topics, such as masturbation, they are usually sending a subliminal message to the students. If the teacher is anxious or uncomfortable while addressing sexual topics, students could interpret that mixed message as society disapproving of those sexual behaviours (Sciaraffa & Randolph, 2011). Edwards (2016) brings attention to this complexity in a case study of Wendy, a British participant who recalls her teacher being “as red as a beetroot” (p. 269) during her sex education lessons. Wendy refers to this experience as horrendous, alluding to the negative impact it had on her. Often, teachers are not appropriately equipped with the proper knowledge and strategies for how to teach about sex and sexuality (Edwards, 2016).

In contrast to Wendy’s narrative, two participants recall very positive experiences in their sex education classes. Ella, from Canada, remembers having a public health nurse come in to teach her sex education who was very approachable and kind, which made Ella feel comfortable. Whereas, Ashley from Scotland, found comfort in having her close friend next to her during sex education classes, as it gave her the confidence she needed to ask questions. These recollections are notable for two reasons: first, Ella had a public health nurse who taught her sex education, not a classroom teacher. This mentorship provided a level of comfort and confidentiality for Ella;

would Ella have felt the same way had her teacher been as approachable and kind as the nurse? Second, both women described their experiences as unique and considered themselves to be lucky to have positive sex education experiences (Edwards, 2016), thus raising the question, like Wendy, do more people recall uncomfortable or even “horrendous” experiences?

**“Race,” Culture, Religion and Sex Education.** It is important to acknowledge that culture and religion are key influences on any formal or informal sex education a child or youth receives from others. Tabatabai (2015) conducted a literature review of Islamic perceptions and opinions regarding sex education in the UK and found that:

Developing and implementing school-based sex education programmes has been one of the most challenging and controversial aspects of the school curriculum in the UK. This is to a large extent due to a disagreement over what values should underpin sex education as a result of ideological and cultural diversity in this country. Among different sections of society, one of the strongest voices of opposition to the practice of school-based sex education has come from Muslims, many of whom have not found it compatible with their religious values and principles (Tabatabai, 2015, p. 281).

As highlighted in the above statement, it is a significant challenge for sex education to be inclusive of everyone’s beliefs and values in relation to youth and sexuality. In the Islamic religion, as with many other religious teachings, the discourse of childhood innocence is deeply rooted in their faith system. Part of Islamic faith is the belief that sex and sexuality should be restricted to adulthood and therefore, children and youth are vulnerable and in need of protection from sexual content and behaviour (Tabatabai, 2015). In Ontario, specifically, a large part of the Muslim community spoke against the new curriculum (Brown, 2015), as it does not align with orthodox Islamic principles. The challenge in Ontario is how to address sex education in the

school system without being offensive to various cultures and religions, including fundamentalist Christians as well. Interestingly, Tabatabai (2015) suggests that if orthodox Muslims re-examine the maturation and development of children, as well as their Islamic principles on education and health, they may be able to see the value in a holistic, comprehensive sex education curriculum, but, of course, this idea remains controversial.

The controversy surrounding religion and sex education leads to a critical examination of the role of anti-racist curriculum in sex education. Whitten and Sethna (2014) believe Ontario's curriculum lacks diversity and advocate for Ontario's sex education curriculum to include an anti-racist framework. Canada is a very diverse population and Ontario, specifically, is very diverse and has the largest Aboriginal population in Canada (Oliver et al., 2015; Whitten & Sethna, 2014). Oliver et al. (2015) conducted a study across Canada with a diverse group of Indigenous youth and found that "[y]oung women are racialised and sexualised by their teachers, and they link this symbolic violence to the treatment of women in their communities, as well as to HIV" (p. 913). Indigenous women are oppressed by the social double standard wherein they are sexualized yet expected to be silent about their sexuality. Women are expected to be asexual or sexually passive, while men are expected to be sexually active and aggressive (Oliver et al., 2015). This understanding and treatment of Indigenous women is rooted in the continued oppressive and racist treatment of First Nations after colonialization (Oliver et al., 2009).

Whitten and Sethna (2014) highlight how anti-racist education should prevail within all curricula, but explicitly how it could be integrated into sex education to enhance sexual subjectivity for students of colour. They conclude the following after their analysis of the grade 9-12 health education curriculum:

Race, ethnicity, culture and religion in these documents are depicted in a problematic manner based on racial essentialism and erasure of race. They are presented as barriers to be overcome in providing sex education, as markers of traditional or non-progressive values related to sex and sexuality and as markers of difference and conflict in the classroom. The documents unsurprisingly align with the notion of raceless curriculum. (Whitten & Sethna, 2014, p. 422).

This diagnosis of the curriculum is note-worthy, as Whitten and Sethna deduce that white supremacy prevails within Ontario's education system, and that "race" is treated as superficial and removable (Whitten & Sethna, 2014). Ironically, the curriculum documents repeatedly state that they should embrace differences, "but fail to provide any concrete examples or instruction as to how this can be achieved..." and their explicit objectives of being non-discriminatory and sensitive "...are in practice empty if these are void of any instructive directives on these ideas (Whitten & Sethna, 2014, p. 423). The Ontario education system often acknowledges its attention to multiculturalism and diversity (Ontario, 2015), yet oppression of diverse "races", cultures, and religions still exists through the racelessness of the content.

**LGBTQ+ and Sex Education.** Sex education also has a role in relation to a person's sexual subjectivity as it intersects with sexual orientation. Gowen and Wings-Yanez (2014) examine sex education in the United States and found sex education to exclude the LGBTQ+ community. They conducted focus groups with youth and found that any sexual orientation outside of heterosexuality was often silenced within sex education, whether passively or actively. As one participant states:

Like, it's always good to know about contraceptives and things like that, but since I'm obviously a queer person, to me it was coming from a very straight perspective. And I

don't have to worry about being pregnant or getting anybody pregnant, and so I didn't feel like that a lot of it had to with me [laughs] (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014).

Youth felt that when they fell outside the heterosexual centre, sex education was not fully relevant, and at some points it was pathologizing, as any reference to sexual orientation was often to highlight the risks of HIV/AIDS in homosexual sexual interactions. Overall, the LGBTQ+ youth advocated for a more inclusive sex education which was appropriate and catered to all sexual orientations, STI prevention, all relationships, anatomy, and more access to information (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014). As noted previously, the new Ontario Healthy Living curriculum does strive to be more inclusive, as the grade 3, 8, and 9 curricula includes topics, such as gender identity and sexual orientation. Moreover, they are suggested as topics of conversation in subsequent grades. Although it is an improvement, I think there is room for Ontario's sex education curriculum to be more inclusive. As suggested by one of Gowen and Wings-Yanez's (2014) transgender participants, changing the language used would make a difference, for example by saying 'female-bodied' instead of 'girls'. By acknowledging a youth's gender and sexual identity, and catering to all individuals' orientations and needs, sex education would better serve all students and encourage greater sexual subjectivity.

### **Peer Shaming/Slut Shaming**

Within my theoretical framework, I noted the concept of panopticism, based on the panopticon prison design that creates a constant sense of surveillance (Mchoul & Grace, 2015). When the discourse of childhood innocence intersects with sexual subjectivity, sexuality is repressed; more so, girls are more likely to be assumed innocent, thus girls are more likely to be sexually repressed. Within this panopticon, peers monitor each others' sexual attitudes and behaviours, often evoking shaming or, as some researchers call it, slut-shaming. The words

“slut” and slut-shaming are sexist terms that are unfairly and unjustly targeted at women (and girls), even Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines slut as a female; “a lewd, dissolute, or promiscuous woman” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary Online). In addition to the gendered nature of the term “slut,” there is no significantly damaging male equivalent for the word. This highlights the sexist nature of the word “slut” and slut-shaming. As Schalet (2010) found, girls are not allowed to express or feel sexual pleasure, creating a powerful stigma around female sexual desire. This can be further understood through Baumeister and Twenge (2002):

Countless women have grown up and lived their lives with far less sexual pleasure than they would have enjoyed in the absence of this large-scale suppression. Socializing influences such as parents, schools, peer groups, and legal forces have cooperated to alienate women from their own sexual desires and transform their (supposedly and relatively) sexually voracious appetites into a subdued remnant. (p. 166)

When girls and women do pursue their sexual desires they are at risk of being labelled a “slut”: “The stigma of the slut, the girl who was overly and overtly sexual, who allowed herself to be used, still held: their character could still be compromised, for themselves as well as others by their sexual activity” (Orenstein, 2016, p.54).

Orenstein (2016) found that a lot of girls worry about their “number,” which is a reference to the number of sexual partners. This concern arises from the stigma of the slut and not wanting to be categorized by their sexual choices. In Orenstein’s (2016) study, girls were worried about what others would think if they pursued their sexual desires with different sexual partners, which resulted in them policing their own behaviour. Interestingly, the girls also expressed their interest in losing their virginity before college, not in the pursuit of sexual pleasure, but to avoid being labelled “the virgin” (Orenstein, 2016). Thus, the girls in Orenstein’s

study were trying to navigate their sexual lives without being categorized as a virgin, but also while not being categorized as a slut. The problem that unfolds within this virgin-slut binary is that it objectifies the girl, who then ends up potentially viewing herself as separate from her sexual desire – consciously making choices about her sexual behaviours based on others' opinions, not on her own needs. But certainly not all girls experience this lack of sexual subjectivity, as some participants in Orenstein's (2016) book exhibited greater sexual subjectivity than others.

A lot of girls can recall moments where they referred to others, or even themselves, as “slutty” or as a “slut”. Schalet (2010) states:

The category of the slut is very salient in interviews with American girls: Almost half of the girls spontaneously use words like ‘slut’, ‘slutty’, or ‘easy’ in reference to perceptions of girls’ sexuality, or recount examples of girls who have been, often quite randomly, slandered as a slut (p. 321).

In North America, the word slut is so easily attached to a women's identity and alludes to a person being sexually active with numerous partners, which challenges the culturally prevalent idea that women should be sexually silent. When Oliver et al. (2015) interviewed Indigenous youth across Canada, girls were labelled as a slut when they had HIV, as this was symbolic of sleeping with a lot of people, which is “slutty.” One participant is quoted as powerfully stating, “[t]here shouldn't be such a word as ‘slut’” (Oliver et al., 2015, p. 915). Although this statement seems obvious, the actions that would need to follow such a statement are less so. The young Indigenous participants advocated for equality amongst women and men and for the stigma around Indigenous women – that they are easy and can be used sexually – to be removed.

The word “slut” is more than just a word, it is a discourse that defines women as objects, and not as sexual subjects, thus silencing female sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

Sexual subjectivity constructs a person as a subject not an object, and acts as a protective factor against unhealthy or unpleasant sexual experiences. Sexual subjectivity has been found to be linked to people with more romantic and sexual experiences rather than age (Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat, & Boislard-Pepin, 2011). However, if it can improve a person’s ability to negotiate sexual experiences (Cheng et al., 2014), we should be better educating young people with the knowledge they need to have sexual subjectivity, as opposed to young people relying on “trial and error” via sexual experiences to gain sexual subjectivity. North American girls and young women are found to lack sexual subjectivity and we thus need to focus on girls’ sexual subjectivity to help improve their sexual health and sexual experiences (Cheng et al., 2014). I focused this research on girls’ sexual subjectivity because when it comes to education and sexuality, “little has been heard from young women themselves” (Fine, 1988). By examining the sexual subjectivity of young people, we can improve sex education by ensuring it is appropriate and appreciated sexual health education (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### **Research Method and Paradigm**

In this chapter I outline my methodology and research strategies and how they are framed within the sociology of childhood. I employed a qualitative methodology as it allows me to share the narratives of my participants (Creswell, 2007) and lets me look beyond the ordinary way of seeing everyday, social life (Esternberg, 2002). As stated by Creswell (2007), qualitative research begins with a worldview or theoretical perspective and investigates a social or human problem. In my study, I use the sociology of childhood to frame the existing gap between sex education and the sexual experiences of young women. By utilizing a qualitative research method, I am able to develop a deeper and more detailed understanding of the topic (Creswell, 2007). I can also have some insight into the complexities of the discourse of childhood and its role in shaping sex education, and thus, shaping girls' sexual experiences and beliefs.

Within the sociology of childhood, children and youth are framed as competent and active social actors in their own lives (James & Prout, 1997). Thus, advocating for young people to be participants in research and to hear about childhood experiences from children and youth (Matthews, 2007) is an essential component to this framework. Matthews (2007) exposes the "old" methods of sociological research:

In research on children in families, for example, parents, typically mothers, routinely speak for their children about issues deemed important by adults. In research on school children, teachers assess children's personalities, abilities, and promise. Interaction among children is dismissed as merely play or as preparation for adulthood. The assumption that children cannot speak for themselves was rarely questioned because the voices of those not yet fully socialized were deemed not worth taking seriously (p. 322).

In the new sociology of childhood, the silencing of children's voices is no longer acceptable; instead young people are given the opportunity to share their narratives (Matthews, 2007). My participants are 18- and 19-year-olds, which according to the United Nations (UN) still classifies them as youth. The UN defines youth as a person between the ages of 15 to 24 (<https://social.un.org/youthyear/docs/UNPY-presentation.pdf>). Throughout my thesis, I refer to childhood, youth, girlhood and young women interchangeably. This is because the boundaries between childhood and youth are often blurred as they are a social construct, thus, each is a plurality which cannot be defined numerically. More so, it becomes quite complex to separate them as the participants in my study are reflecting on their younger childhood memories while also reflecting on their current experiences.

The sociology of childhood offers an appropriate framework as it defines children and youth as social actors, recognizing them as capable of being an active participant in research. Alanen (2005) frames her study within the sociology of childhood, as she interviewed Finnish children, both in pairs and individually. Alanen's (2005) study aimed to evaluate and analyze the every day lives of children to contribute to the understanding of childhood. The interviews took place at each child's home or school, with the choice of when and where to conduct the interview being up to the participants. For some interviews, Alanen walked home with the students while interviewing them (Alanen, 2005). This is noteworthy for two reasons: first, it allowed for the child to describe that part of their day while it was happening; and second, it was a comfortable space for the child as they regularly walked that route. I interviewed Campbell University (pseudonym used) students in a bookable space on campus in the hopes that my participants were comfortable as we were on campus, which is a familiar space to them. I also ensured we

were in a private space, as it was important to be in a space that does not allow for others to interrupt or overhear our conversation.

Although my study focuses on sharing the voices of young women, it is important to recognize that their narratives are contextualized within intersecting discourses of race, gender, class, sexuality, childhood, and youth. Since a discourse is a powerful yet invisible form of social knowledge that constructs and maintains truths (Lam, 2012), it shapes the experiences and voices of individuals. I thus highlight the voices of young women to add depth and insight to the discourses of childhood, as they have shaped their experiences. I draw on their narratives to bring attention to how the construction of childhood influences what adults taught them about sex and how this shaped their sexual knowledge and encounters.

### **Method of Interviewing**

I conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 6 participants. In qualitative research, interviews are an opportunity to explore a phenomenon or problem, through open-ended questions (Creswell, 2007). As well, “questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 43). This kind of interview is known as semi-structured since the researcher has a series of open-ended questions to ask, but also will modify and change questions based on the participants’ responses; as Esternberg (2002) states, “...the researcher needs to listen carefully to the participant’s responses and to follow his or her lead” (p. 87). I chose semi-structured interviews as it allowed me to concentrate on a specific topic, which is how girls are educated about sex and sexuality, and their personal experiences as young women. However, it also enabled participants to control the direction of the conversation and express themselves openly and in their own words (Esternberg, 2002). Esternberg (2002) states that, “because women historically have been silenced, they have

not always had the opportunity to tell their own stories. In-depth interviews allow them to do so” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). I wanted to provide an opportunity for young women to share their stories. I conducted 45-60 minute interviews, asking participants open-ended questions (see table 1).

I originally planned on conducting the interviews in a library seminar room, however, due to exam season, it was difficult to find availability; therefore, I conducted some of the interviews in a Campbell University department meeting room and some of the interviews in a private office space. I wanted to ensure participants’ privacy, as it is important that they feel comfortable during the interview (Creswell, 2007). I recorded my interviews using Campbell University’s digital voice recorders as well as my own personal device as a back-up recorder.

When working with young people, it is important to also consider the power dynamic between the researcher and the participant (McGarry, 2016). As the discourse of childhood innocence highlights, it is the cultural norm to assume children to be innocent, asexual, and vulnerable. This places them in an oppressive position, where the adult researcher is assumed to be in a position of authority over them. This power dynamic may have made the young women in my study feel pressured to give an answer that they believed I wanted to hear, as opposed to their actual views and experiences (Matthews, 2007). To help ameliorate this power dynamic, I needed to build rapport with my participants (Esterberg, 2002), which I hoped I accomplished by asking a series of icebreaker questions, as well as through my own body language and demeanour: I sat at the same level as my participants, answered some of the ice breaker questions myself (i.e., where are you from, what program did I take at university) and opened the door for them to ask any questions they may have had throughout the interview. In addition,

since I am a young researcher (mid-twenties), my participants seemed to find me easy to relate to, which also helped lessen the power dynamic.

### **Sample and Recruitment**

The target population for my study was 17 to 19-year-olds, self-identified females who were in their first or second year of university. I chose to interview this particular group as it is an age where young people can still reflect back on their childhood without too much time having past between the present and elementary school/high school. Reflections on how their childhoods have shaped their experiences as youth will hopefully be readily available to them. I also took into consideration accessibility and ethics. As my study is being conducted at an Ontario university, it was easiest for me to conduct my research within this geographical location. This tactic is known as convenience sampling, defined by Creswell (2007) as using participants who are conveniently available. I did not consider younger participants because I would need the consent of parents/guardians to conduct research with anyone under the age of 18. As Matthews (2007) states, “[a] major problem encountered in applying the ‘new’ sociology of childhood perspective in research is that children may have no independent right to participate in research” (p. 322). The sociology of childhood recognizes how challenging it is for young people’s voices to be heard, thus, it advocates for research with children and youth to help them be heard. For my study, it would have been difficult to find children to interview and attain parental consent within my timeline. I also believe it is more beneficial to hear from youth who are likely to have more sexual experiences to speak to when reflecting on their past and present.

My sample size was six Campbell University self-identified females, three 18-year-olds, and three 19-year-olds, in their first year of university. I used three forms of recruitment for my study: posters (appendix D) around campus, announcements in first year courses (WGST 1F90

and CHYS 1F90) and word of mouth. Thus, in addition to convenient sampling, I also relied on snowball sampling. Although snowballing is often discouraged in research (Creswell, 2007), I believed it would benefit my study as I was targeting a specific age group. I also hung posters throughout various spaces at Campbell University to attract a diverse group of participants; my goal was to have a diverse group of participants in regards to ethnicity, sexuality, and socio-economic status. I contacted the Aboriginal Studies department, as well as Campbell University's Pride Club, asking them to hang my poster in their spaces. Unfortunately, despite my efforts, I was unable to recruit a diverse group of participants. The six young women in my study all identified as white and heterosexual, as well as 5 of them identified as middle class, and one as lower class.

Once a Campbell University student contacted me, I sent out a letter of invitation (Appendix A) to explain what the research was about and why they were being asked to participate. Once I confirmed participation, I found a date and time that worked for both the participant and myself, and booked a one-hour interview with each participant.

### **Interview Questions**

Table 1 lists the semi-structured interview questions I used during each interview. Since I employed a semi-structured interview schedule, each interview did not always follow the questions in chronological order, allowing participants to direct the flow of the interview. In addition to the prescribed questions, I also asked additional questions when a certain narrative or story suggested an interesting direction. For example, in all but one of my interviews, there was a conversation about "kill count" (number of sexual partners) and peer pressure, and I engaged the participant in a deeper conversation about these topics.

Table 1 – Interview Questions

## Ice Breaker Questions

1. What are you taking at University?
2. What do you enjoy doing in your free time?
3. Can you tell me a little bit about the city/town you grew up in?
4. What about now, where are you living?
5. How would you describe yourself?
6. How would others describe you?

## Topic Questions

7. How do you think girls learn about sex?
8. When and how do you think adults talk to girls about sex?
  - a. What topics do you think are talked about?
  - b. What topics do you think are avoided?
9. Do you think peers influence other peers' sexual beliefs and behaviours?
  - a. How?
  - b. Do you think age is relevant?
10. A lot of people think the media shows inappropriate material for girls, what do you think about this?
11. Do you think girls get enough information about sex? Why/why not?

## Storytelling Questions

12. Can you tell me about the first time you remember learning about sex...
  - a. How did you learn about it?
  - b. From who?

13. Did you and your parents openly communicate about sex?
  - a. How did you feel when your parents would talk to you about it?
  - b. Do you currently talk to your parents about sex?
14. Can you recall what you learned in sex education?
15. Do you remember liking sex education?
16. Do you think that your sex education was comprehensive enough?
17. Do you remember learning about sex from other people, such as parents or older siblings?
  - a. What did you learn from them?
  - b. What information do you think was missing from those conversations?
18. Do you consider yourself sexually active? If yes,
  - a. When recalling your sexual encounters, what are your thoughts and feelings about, or reactions to, the experiences?
  - b. How do you feel during a sexual encounter? What are your expectations?
  - c. How do you feel after a sexual encounter?
  - d. Do your sex education in school prepare you for your sexual experiences?  
How? Why not?
19. If you are not sexually active, how do you feel your education or parental advice contributed to this decision?
20. Do you consider yourself to have sexual agency (Explain if necessary)? Why or why not?
21. Tell me about a time when you felt you really could have used more information growing up about sex?

**Exit Questions**

22. If you could choose how you learned about sex as a girl, what would you have liked to see?
23. If you have, or plan on having, your own children,
  - a. How would you want them to learn about sex? From who?
  - b. Would you talk to them about sex?
  - c. What would you teach them?
24. Is there anything I have not asked about that you want to share? Any final comments?

**Data Analysis**

As I noted above, I am sharing the narratives of my participants, but it is important that I contextualize what they say within the broader discourse of childhood. I did this by employing a discourse analysis to deconstruct the concept of childhood and the complexities of understanding childhood within the framework of sex and sexuality. As previously stated in chapter one, the term discourse can hold many meanings; my thesis employs Foucault's (1972) definition, which describes discourse as a circulating body of knowledge.

Discourse analysis is a popular methodology in qualitative research (Macleod, 2002), but it also can vary in how it is performed – as there are many meanings for discourse, there are also many meanings for discourse analysis (Brown & Yule, 1983). Often, discourse analysis refers to a more analytical understanding of the use of language (Brown & Yule, 1983), also referred to as critical discourse analysis. However, when doing discourse analysis utilizing Foucault's definition of discourse, a more social constructionist interpretation is used, which can be defined as an investigation into how a certain body of knowledge comes to be accepted as truth, or

common sense. Foucault emphasizes the importance of studying the *effects* generated by this form of discursive power rather than focusing attention on how or why it was produced (Mchoul & Grace, 2015). Macleod (2002) names the Foucauldian approach as deconstructive discourse analysis, explaining that “[d]econstructive discourse analysis implies undermining the revelation of essence, de-stabilising meaning as presence, and disrupting dominant, taken-for granted notions of a subject” (p. 18). In a deconstructive discourse analysis, “the focus is on the social and power/knowledge effects of discourse” (Macleod, 2002, p. 18).

As I explored in chapter one, childhood is a period where a young person is frequently presumed to be innocent (Robinson, 2008), asexual (Robinson, 2008; Flanagan, 2011; Surtees, 2005), and vulnerable (Lam, 2012; Robinson, 2008). In my study, I aimed to understand the effects of various dominant discourses of childhood, such as innocence, asexuality, vulnerability, and becoming on what and how children are learning about sex, and how this has shaped their sexual beliefs and behaviours into young womanhood. The discourses of childhood innocence, asexuality and vulnerability prevail in the West, influencing social and political decisions about children and childhood, including what information to make available to children and youth. I analyzed how the narratives of my participants intersect with these discourses within a sociology of childhood framework.

I used an open-coding method to analyze my transcripts. Open coding is often understood as a two-tiered process, wherein you analyze each transcript line by line, highlighting any topics/categories that emerge; then, after reflecting on all the transcripts, you draw on reoccurring, common themes (Esterberg, 2002). Since I had a small sample of six participants, I read the transcripts on the computer screen and made notes on paper. Although my open coding took place after the transcription phase, I also made analytic memos during and after each

interview of interesting topics or themes that emerged (Esterberg, 2002). By the time I completed my open coding, I already felt familiar with the data, which, as Esterberg (2002) states, is the goal of data analysis: “As you become more familiar with your data, you will naturally begin to see patterns and commonalities and develop a focus” (p.158). Once I had identified my major themes, I physically sorted my data into each theme using word documents and copying from each interview to sort relevant data under each code, Esterberg (2002) states, “...some researchers literally cut up a copy of the interview transcripts or their field notes into pieces...Then, they sort the slips into piles, often multiple times, to see what themes seem to emerge” (p.161). This “cut and paste” method is the process I used, except I took a more virtual approach by using word documents. In addition, I also found my themes to change or modify once I started this process. Once I had my themes, I reflected on the “So what? What do these data mean” (Esterberg, 2002) within a discourse analysis framework?

When conducting a deconstructive discourse analysis the researcher does not take the traditional role of the “‘knowers’ or ‘measurers’ of human beings and their behaviour” (Macleod, 2002, p. 20), but instead is an expert at asking questions and interpreting data. When analyzing my data, I was cautious of my understandings of certain behaviours and beliefs, as I am steeped in the dominant discourse of childhood. In my role as researcher, I endeavoured not to reproduce these dominant discourses. Instead, I explored the construction of childhood and how children are *perceived* to be innocent, asexual, and vulnerable – not that this is a prescribed truth that must be adhered to – and how this has affected what they learn about sex and the significance this has on their sexual experiences.

## **Consent and Ethics**

I began each interview by having participants review and complete the consent form (Appendix A). I also verbally reviewed the consent form with each participant prior to beginning the discussion to ensure they understood their rights, emphasizing their right to not answer a question or withdraw without penalty at any point during the interview, or any time after. I also told participants to not use specific names of people or places to ensure confidentiality of each participant and the people or places that may come up in their interview. If a participant did refer to a specific name or a person or place, I used pseudonyms when transcribing the interview. I also used a pseudonym for each participant. I wanted to ensure that each participant felt comfortable and safe, thus, anonymity was essential.

At the end of my interview I also made sure participants were verbally made aware of counselling available within their university and the community, such as Campbell University on-campus counselling services, Distress Centre Niagara, Niagara Region Sexual Assault Centre, and Gillian's Place. This information was also made available on a feedback form (Appendix C) that I provided to each participant. Although I did not anticipate any psychological risks, nor did I notice any negative reactions during my interviews, some participants may have had a psychological reaction while participating in my study. Sex and sexuality can be sensitive subjects for some people, and thus, talking about it may bring up feelings of embarrassment, shame, fear, and sadness or memories of negative experiences. Thus, it was important that I reminded participants of their right to not answer a question or to withdraw from the study at any given time and provide the feedback form (Appendix C), with references to local counselling services. As the researcher, it was my role to support each participant and be mindful of her feelings.

The benefits of participating in my study are that participants have an opportunity to share their personal narratives. Young people are often silenced and my study provides an opportunity to become part of a collective group of female voices speaking up about their experiences. Given the topic of my study, my research offers an understanding of the complexities that exist when looking at childhood and sex/sexuality. It contributes to the trending topic of sex education in schools and how sex education should be addressed in schools. Moreover, it provides a young person's perception of the topic, not just adults' perceptions.

#### **Chapter 4: Discussion**

My study employs a qualitative methodology, wherein I use the narratives of my participants to critically address my research questions. After analyzing the transcribed interviews of the 6 participants, multiple themes emerged, which I explore in this chapter. I have chosen to break-up my data into two parts: 1) a reflection on formal education (school; parents; and peer groups); and 2) emerging themes ("keep [kinda] calm and google it" which depicts the young women's experiences of being self-taught; "when a man loves a woman" which unravels the hegemonic, biological nature of sex education; "the missing discourse of desire" which highlights the lack of conversation about female desire and pleasure; "experiencing the unknown" which describes the vulnerability the young women felt during their first sexual experiences; and "damned if you and damned if you don't" which analyzes the virgin-slut dichotomy and sexual double standard). After discussing the themes, I will use the sociology of childhood to frame my analysis, utilizing a discourse analysis to contextualize my findings in terms of their relation to the dominant discourses of childhood (innocence, asexuality, vulnerability, and children as "becoming").

### **Reflecting on Formal Education**

Before I explore the themes that emerged, it is important to reflect on how the young women in my study felt they learned about sex and how they thought most young women and girls learn about sex. Like Edwards (2016), I acknowledged school, parents, and peer groups as sources of formal education; this is because “all three become entangled, often promoting and unpacking, problematising and exploring, many of the same themes” (Edwards, 2016, p. 268). Edwards (2016) highlights how youth often find all three sources of “formal” education to not be enough, and they seek out other, informal means to learn about sex. In this section of my analysis, I will highlight how or how much my participants felt they learned from school, parents and peer groups.

**School.** Before my interviews, I had suspected some of my participants would find school to be an inadequate source of information when reflecting on learning about sex and sexuality; however, I did not anticipate just how strong that feeling of inadequacy would be. As Kelly stated when asked about her sex education experience in school: “Mmm, I remember, I was trying to think about this today and I was asking my sister about it, what she remembered, but like I don’t remember too much because I think it was very brief.” When I asked my participants if they felt school taught girls enough about sex, all but one firmly stated, “No.” Kelly further explains, “Uhh, no [laughs], definitely not, yeah they don’t teach you anything about life, and life pertaining to sex at all, just, the technical.” Her reflection indicates that her school sex education fell short in terms of being realistic of what young people are experiencing or will experience in the future. In Edwards’ (2016) study, most of the participants did not necessarily label their school sex education as “bad,” but they also did not label it as positive either. Two of Edwards’ participants who reflected on their school experiences as positive also

acknowledged that they felt they were lucky to receive a good sex education, indicating that they felt their positive experiences were rare.

An interesting theme that emerged when discussing the role of schools in educating youth about sex is the difference, or perceived difference, between Catholic and public schools (in Ontario, there is a public Catholic system and a public secular system, and both are publicly funded. There are also independent, private Catholic schools where students pay tuition. I had two participants (Kelly and Dana) who went to public school, and the other four (Abby, Sarah, Jillian and Hannah) all went to a Catholic high school, and a mix of Catholic, public, and private for elementary school. Abby, Sarah, Hannah, and Jillian all felt that their lack of sex education was because they were in the Catholic school system. Jillian explained that her sex education was limited due to the Catholic curriculum:

Um, I think like, honestly, I can't remember much from elementary school, we probably learned something about body parts and all of that. In high school, grade 9 phys ed, we would talk about STDs and stuff, but that's like, just about it. Like nothing else, cause it was like a Catholic school, so they can't get into a lot of details about things.

Abby, Sarah, and Hannah echoed similar experiences and thoughts in their interviews, as they talked about the hyper-focus on unwanted pregnancy and STIs. As a result, Sarah feared sex prior to dating her first boyfriend:

I think if I would of learned more information I would have been a lot less panicked and scared, and like, before that first experience I was very against sex because I knew nothing about it. I remember he [her boyfriend] went to Catholic school too, and he was like "you act like sex is so scary; it's not, the school just makes us think that, it's

supposed to be something that feels good.” But I was very against it, just cause that was what I had been taught I guess.

Her reflection is significant as it emphasizes how school scared her into abstaining from sex, but also, how her significant other was willing to call the school out for its misguided sex education lessons. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the role of gender, as Sarah’s boyfriend is seemingly aware that sex does not have to be scary or negative and it can even be pleasurable. Has he been exposed to more sex-positive communication because he is male? Why is he more aware, and potentially more educated, about sex?

Although Abby, Sarah, Hannah, and Jillian blame their lack of education on the Catholic school system, Kelly and Dana also felt that the education system failed to prepare them for their experiences. Both Catholic and public school boards in Ontario are required to teach the same Healthy Living curriculum, however, the Catholic school boards can teach it through a Catholic lens ensuring it aligns with their faith. This brings up some important questions: are students in Catholic schools receiving less sex education than those in public schools? Or is this difference a perceived phenomenon? Six narratives are not enough to adequately answer these questions. However, my findings would suggest that whether students are in a Catholic or public school, they are likely not getting enough sex education.

Although it is easy to critique how schools fail to adequately equip students with the information they need to navigate their sexual beliefs and experiences, it is a lot more difficult to critique individual teachers. It is taboo for adults to talk children about sex, thus, it is likely very difficult for most teachers to feel comfortable teaching sex education in the classroom. During her interview, Dana recalled her teacher’s use of humour to teach the sexual health content, “...so only the girls had the sex education and that teacher was super funny about it, but like,

almost like, you can't be serious when she's being funny because like, so like maybe she was awkward and that was her way of approaching it," but afterwards also states, "yeah, like I feel like she was definitely comfortable, she made things kind of funny, like when we were learning about the condom and how to put one on, she made it funny." The two statements slightly contradict each other, as the former suggests that the teacher used humour to mask her uneasiness, while the latter, suggests the teacher was comfortable and used humour to break the ice. Unless, I interview the teacher directly, it is impossible to really know how the teacher felt. However, I can acknowledge that often, teachers are not necessarily equipped with the proper knowledge and strategies for how to teach students about sex and sexuality (Edwards, 2016), which can make it very difficult for teachers to feel comfortable and confident when teaching sexual health education.

**Parents.** In my study, Kelly stated that she came from a sex-positive home, where everyone could openly talk about sex, but she also stated that she felt like her experience was unusual. Based on the other participants' experiences with their parents and conversations about sex, I would say Kelly's experiences of a sex-positive home are rare. In contrast to Kelly, Dana explained that when she got her first boyfriend, her mom started to talk to her about sex:

Yeah, well my mom's basically like "don't be an idiot"...Like she told me the options, and like I could talk to her about it, and like she'd always want to know where I was and make sure there is parents, cause even though she knows what's gonna [happen] like she still wants to be aware that I'm going to be safe I guess, it was just more like, that kind of stuff.

Abby's mom had a similar approach:

Yeah, and that's what my mom did, she spoke a lot about protection, like I was on birth control, or you're in a relationship now, so condoms, but she never actually talked about it, like, "Oh this is used because this will happen with a guy and you don't want it [semen] to go inside of you."

So although both Dana and Abby had open communication about sex with one or both parents, they did not construe these conversations as sex-positive. Hannah also said she felt comfortable talking to her mom about sex, but that they did not really have conversations about her actually having sex because she wears a purity ring, signalling her religious choice and commitment to stay chaste. Lastly, both Jillian and Sarah said they would not really be comfortable talking to their parent about sex. Jillian recalled only one conversation with her mom about sex: "After like my boyfriend and I started dating, first thing she mentions is 'NO SEX! If you get pregnant it can ruin your life' stuff like that, that's like the only thing I can recall." She reflected on how their differing views on sex was the reason she did not talk about her sex life with her mom (or dad).

The general experiences of my participants are reflective of findings from previous research, as Edwards (2016) and Schalet (2010) found that most of their American participants had conversations with their parents that focused only on the dangers of sex. Sarah and Abby also chose not to talk to their parent(s) about sex, as Abby said, "...this is bad; my mom thinks I haven't had sex cause I'm too afraid to tell her..." Abby's hesitation to reveal her sexual choices to her mom are similar to the American girls in Schalet's study, who felt they had to bifurcate between their role as the good daughter and sexual actor. When Abby explained why she had not told her mother, she states;

Ya, I don't know, cause she wasn't a huge fan of my ex, like she liked him. but she was very, like, "You need to get rid of him," and I was like, "no," and the first time is supposed to be so special you know what I mean, and I feel like she'd be like, "you seriously had your first time with him?" and so I'm just nervous.

Her explanation highlights how she does not want her mother to judge her sexual choices more so than she does not want to shatter the good daughter image.

**Peer Groups.** Although peer groups are not usually thought of as part of "formal" education, I follow Edwards' (2016) framework for reflecting on "formal" sex education to include peer groups because, "the school curriculum and advice given from parents is usually discussed in peer groups" (p. 268). However, I am using the word "formal" more loosely in this research to recognize peers as a main source of "unofficial" sex education. Most of my participants referred to peers and friends as their main source of information, even before their parents. As Dana noted:

And my mom didn't really talk about it until I kind of said something, like we have a pretty close relationship so I could like talk to her about that if I wanted too, but I would talk about it to my friends first, and then like when I started, whatever, wondering, then I would talk to her.

When I asked Sarah how she thought most young girls learned about sex, she stated:

Friends, probably, a lot through friends I would think. Most of the people I know, that's kind of like, you first hear it in the playground when I was young, mainly through peers, and generally the peers have older siblings that they've learned it from.

Similarly, Abby felt that her older friends were her primary source of information:

I feel, like from my own personal experiences, I learned about it from my other girlfriends. Like, I learned about it from my girl neighbours, they were in high school and I was in elementary school and they all had boyfriends and they would talk about things, and I would kind of ask, “What is that?” and I learned that way. Um, or in school, it got introduced to me in grade six with our Fully Alive books, so that too.

I was not expecting my participants to recognize peer groups as such a dominate source of information, but all of them recalled past and present experiences wherein they discussed sex, including their own sexual beliefs and behaviours, with friends instead of parents. Based on the conversations I had with my participants, I think what dramatically separates the types of conversations had in peer groups with conversations with parents and in the school is that within a peer group, the conversations are more inclusive of topics, such as foreplay and pleasure. However, although peer groups tended to have more inclusive conversations about sex, they were still censored due to the often-enforced binary between “the good girl” and “the sexual actor.” I will return to this dichotomy and the related theme of slut-shaming later in this chapter.

### **Keep (Kinda) Calm and Google It**

After exploring how much young women learn – or do not learn – from school, parents, and peer groups, it is evident that there is a lack of information for girls about sex, which raises the question, where are young women and girls getting the information they need or want? A lot of participants talked about being self-taught via informal sources such as the Internet, trial and error, books, and magazines. Jillian spoke about how she did not feel prepared for her own sexual experiences and a lot of her knowledge came from being self-taught. When I asked her how she taught herself, she responded:

Um, to be honest, I turned to some of my friends who had like more experience in that stuff, just for pointers and stuff like that, and I know I've come across some things on like Snapchat, like *Cosmopolitan* articles, like how to do this better, and I'm like, "Oh okay, let's see what it says," stuff like that.

Her response highlights how accessible the Internet is for young people, as information about anything and everything is at our finger tips, whether it is true or not. In 2009, Bleakley et al. conducted a study with 459, 14-16 year old youth and found that media is identified as a common source of information on sex, in addition to peers, school, and families. More interestingly, the older youth seemed to rely more heavily on media sources for sexual information.

Snapchat is a popular app that allows friends to share photos and videos, as well as read snip-it news articles from magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*. As Jillian mentioned, *Cosmopolitan* magazine often focuses on "how-to" information for sexual activities and relationships. In addition to online magazines, participants talked about Googling information. For example, Dana talked about Googling the definition of an orgasm. As well, Dana explained to me that she learned a lot about sex by just listening to her older cousin share stories, but in response to where she would get information, she stated: "Definitely my mom, and also, like I know this is, the Internet, I know you can't always trust stuff, but you can always Google stuff. Which is kind of not good I guess if you, you have to trust your sources. Definitely my mom though." What is interesting about Dana's response is her skeptical attitude towards the Internet, recognizing that not all sources are reliable. As Edwards (2016) highlights, the Internet is very accessible for young people and can allow for them to take control of their sex education, but there is often a concern around reliability.

In addition to the Internet, Kelly talked about being self-taught via books; she even went so far as to affirm that her knowledge about sex is not so much from school, but from taking the initiative to be self-taught by reading book around her house. Kelly comes from a sex-positive home, and her father is a nurse who is comfortable teaching her about sexual health, so it is possible that she had a lot of sex education books at her fingertips. However, some other participants, talked about learning through experience, as Abby states: “So I feel like for girls, it’s a lot of trial and error, like they’ll get a boyfriend, and they’ll test it out, see what they like, don’t like, or even with guys too, cause nobody really wants to talk about it.” Abby’s words are significant as they highlight not only this idea of being informally self-taught, but also about how young women are not taught about pleasure and desire, and these are the gaps she was trying to fill in through trial and error.

The adult-child binary is prevalent within this theme, as the girls talk about having to be self-taught, since both school and parents have sheltered them from relevant knowledge they both need and want. This adult-child binary is rooted in the discourse of children as becoming adults and the discourse of innocence. The concept of becoming separates childhood and adulthood, which leads to both intentional and unintentional ignorance of the experiences of children and youth (Uprichard, 2008, p. 304). When we understand childhood as a time of innocence, adults try to limit exposure to topics that are deemed inappropriate for them (Robinson, 2008). Even though the adults in the participants’ lives may have limited the sexual health information they provide to each participant, all the participants talk about how they found other ways to retrieve the information, such as the Internet, trial and error, books, and magazines. Thus, rebelling against the restrictions and limitations created by the adult-child binary was common.

### **When a Man Loves a Woman**

As I have already noted, the sex education girls receive in school and from their parents is almost always heterosexual, with a focus on sex for reproduction, delaying sex, and the negative consequences of sex. When I asked Kelly if she felt that girls in general get enough information about sex, she reflected on the education girls receive (or don't receive) in school:

Mmmmmmm, I don't... [long pause], in school, I'd say, no because like I said it's very, "Here's what you do to make a baby when you're old enough to be ready to have a baby like when you're in your twenties or thirties and you find like the perfect the man and you have a job and stuff," and like, you are not taught about the fact that you could be at a party, right you know, like grade 9, you're learning about this and they don't tell you that you could go to a party next week and be put in a situation where you could be having sex. They don't prepare you for that.

Similarly, Abby also recalled this story:

We never talked about sex itself, like what happens, how it works. It was just the female body a lot, and they kind of touched on the male body. It was never like this is sex and this is how it happens, nothing like that. What I remember is like, especially about the female body is, cause we were going to start getting our periods around that time, how to deal with it and growing boobs, and hormones, and deodorant and body odour, that kind of thing. It was never like, I never recall, actually talking about sex itself.

These two quotes are representative of a lot of the conversations I had with my participants. A lot of my participants talked about how sex was talked about for the purpose of reproduction and any conversation outside of this purpose revolved around conversations about unwanted pregnancy and STIs. More so, there was a common undertone of a desire to learn about how sex

works that was not addressed in school, as a lot of the young women I talked with felt completely unprepared in that regard.

For instance, the curriculum was covered so vaguely for Sarah that students became confused:

I remember we, um, they just kind of more talked about parts and answered questions, they talked about how you can still get pregnant if you have sex in a pool, I remember that, um, because I remember they didn't explain it well, and people thought, cause they said you can get pregnant in a pool, and they didn't say from having sex in a pool, and people [laughs], and people thought you could get pregnant from being in a pool, like, so that explains how well my sexual education was. Um, I remember that they had to clear that up because there were kids on the swim team that were nervous!

Sarah's story emphasizes how sex education is failing to appropriately educate students. This failing is similar to Allen's (2005, 2008) findings, which showed that the curriculum does not acknowledge the reality of student's sexual experiences and therefore fails to engage and inform their students.

The parallels between Allen's findings and mine are clear, as the participants in my study expressed how the curriculum failed to prepare them for their experiences. As Abby states, "Cause like, like I said, they didn't talk about sex itself or what to expect, or how things would feel, or anything like that you, you know what I mean?" All of my participants either explicitly mentioned or alluded to the fact that sex education in schools does not talk about sex itself, as Dana reiterates:

I was nervous, like especially your first time, you don't know what to expect and like you hear terrible stories, "Oh it hurts, blah blah blah," and like that's another thing they don't

talk about it, if it hurts, what happens the first time, they don't talk about the actual sex, they just talk about what can happen after.

This hyper-focus on the consequences of sex leaves students trying to fill in the blanks of what happens before and during sexual encounters.

It is important that I acknowledge that one of my participants, Hannah, felt that her sex education did, indeed, prepare her for her sexual experiences. However, she was also the only participant who was not sexually active. Hannah wore a purity ring, which is symbolic of her promise to her Dad to stay a virgin until married. Hannah felt sex education in schools was adequate, however, as you can see from the response below, a disconnect exists between her answer and explanation:

I think so, I feel like everything was just from peers. The stuff I learned from peers would be weird to talk about in school anyway. Like its not really necessary to go over, except like different genders being together, not just when a man loves a woman.

Although she felt school covered a good amount of information, the disconnect may be due to her discomfort with learning about sex, beyond reproduction and body functions, from teachers. Moreover, when the other participants reflected on their sex education they drew on their sexual experiences and how they felt unprepared for those experiences. Perhaps, Hannah felt school covered enough information because she has not had to apply the information in a real life situation. It is also important to note that although Hannah felt the school covered an adequate amount of sex education, she also believes the curriculum needs to be more inclusive of all sexualities.

**The Purity Ring.** Purity rings are symbolic religious gestures that promise abstinence of the wearer until marriage (Manning, 2015). Hannah explains,

Not a lot of people wear them, it's kind of an old-fashioned thing, but when I was a little kid, 16 was the age when it was like, I'm allowed to date now, which is an old-fashioned thing to even have like an age or number. But um, I was fine with it, whatever, but when I turned 16 my dad gave this to me, it's like a promise ring, but to my dad that I will stay pure until the wedding ring comes.

Hannah identified as Christian and clarified that although it is a common Christian practice to abstain from sex until marriage, wearing a purity ring is not a common practice in her Christian community. Jessica Valenti (2010) dismantles the idea of the purity pledge in her book *The Purity Myth*, introducing the topic by stating, “[g]irls ‘going wild’ aren’t damaging a generation of women, the myth of sexual purity is” (p. 9). Her strongly voiced opinion is that girls are being told to remain pure by parents or schools, while being exposed to the sexualization of girls in the media, creating a confusing dichotomy between sexualization and purity (Valenti, 2010).

The idea of remaining chaste and the purity ring as a symbol of chastity is deeply entrenched in the dominant discourse of childhood innocence, and more specifically girlhood innocence. In Manning’s (2015) study, families of children (mostly girls) who took the purity pledge express how girls are unable to “to understand or assert themselves sexually” (p. 111), one mother even stated that God made men sexual and a father stated that a girl will just do whatever a boy asks them too if they think the boy likes them. Valenti (2010) explores how this idea of teaching girls to remain chaste has little to do with sexual health and more to do with a social agenda, but teaching girls simply to remain virgins is more harmful than helpful. She states, “[t]his has much to do with the fact that ‘virgin’ is almost always synonymous with ‘woman’. Virgin sacrifices, popping cherries, white dresses, supposed vaginal tightness, you name it” (p. 21). When a woman is a virgin, she is considered “pure” and “innocent,” which is

often praised in North America, and “is touted as the greatest thing we can do” (Valenti, 2010, p. 24).

Although Valenti’s book is insightful and well-informed, it is also only one opinion about the purity pledge. At the beginning of her book, Valenti does note that culture, religion, and social beliefs all have a role in a person’s understanding of virginity and sexuality. She states,

So, to be clear, when I argue for an end to the idea of virginity it’s because I believe sexual intimacy should be honored and respected, but it shouldn’t be revered at the expense of women’s well-being, or seen as such an integral part of female identity that we end up defining ourselves by our sexuality (Valenti, 2010, p. 22).

Like Valenti, I do not want to impose on Hannah’s right, or any other person’s right, to choose abstinence. As well, Hannah affirmed that she asked for the purity ring, indicating that although traditionally it is a promise to her father, it was her choice to wear the ring. Hannah has every right to remain abstinent, just as my other participants have a right to engage in sexual experiences.

**LGBTQ+ and Sex Education.** Unfortunately, I was not able to recruit a more diverse population and all my participants identified as straight. However, the theme of “when a man loves a woman” brings about the obvious heterosexual nature of sex education. Similar to the findings of Gowen & Wings-Yanez (2014), it is apparent that the sex education young people receive in schools is not very relevant to the LGBTQ community. Some of the participants in my study recalled learning, briefly, about different sexual orientations, and with the new curriculum in place, conversations about gender identity and sexuality are now happening in grade 3, 8 and 9. However, I am willing to predict that there is still a lack of inclusivity when talking about sex itself, if young straight people do not feel they learned enough about how sex works, I think it is

fair to assume that people who identify outside of the “heterosexual centre” are certainly not learning enough in sex education. I have drawn on my data when making this assumption, as teaching sex as an act for “when a man loves a woman” suggests that there is a lack of conversation about other kinds of emotional and sexual relationships. In Gowen & Wings-Yanez’s (2014) study, participants highlight how sex education often did not apply to an LGBTQ person. For example, any conversations about birth control were strictly based on heterosexual intercourse. Participants talked about how the only time homosexuality came up in sex education was when talking about HIV and AIDS, which further contributes to the stigmatization of being a gay male. Although Gowen & Wings-Yanez’s (2014) study is based on the experiences of youth in the United States, I think similar findings of heterosexist sex education would be present in Canada.

### **The Missing Discourse of Desire**

This theme was easy to miss when reflecting on my interviews. At first glance, I thought, “Wow! None of my participants addressed how female sexuality and pleasure is missing from the curriculum, at least, not until I directly asked them.” Fine’s (1988) study suggests the exact same thing – female desire is silenced. It is so silent, that young women do not even realize that this is a missing piece from their sex education. In fact, the more I analyzed my transcripts, the more I realized that the missing discourse of desire is still as prevalent today as it was nearly thirty years ago.

Dana: Yeah, like they just try and make it sound so negative, rather than, yeah it might be negative when you’re at a certain age or whatever but it’s not really their choice, like in

grade 6 they made it sound so bad, and like grade 7 and 8, so bad, and then like because they don't want you to do it, so they make it sound really awful, an awful thing to do.

Katrien: Right, so it's very negative?

Dana: Yeah, like I feel like they don't talk about the good, positive things, I guess.

Through our conversation, Dana realized that the "good, positive things" about sex were missing from her sex education classes. The sex education curriculum covered in school, and often by parents, focuses on the consequences associated with sex and lacks any mention or detail about expressing sexuality and pleasure. As Sarah explicitly stated in her interview, "Yeah! Not like pleasure kind of conversations, just more like what it is and why people do it, and they generally always say, like, to like produce a baby, is the main purpose."

In my interviews, when I asked my participants what they felt was missing from their sex education experiences, most of the participants hesitated, were unsure, or said things such as, how sex works, foreplay and/or consent. After giving them time to reflect on their answers, I asked my participants if they learned about pleasure, and all said no. When asked about if they learned about pleasure for females, they all said no. I asked if they learned about female masturbation, and all except Jillian stated that they had not learned about it. Hannah stated, "No, definitely not." When I asked Kelly, who is from a sex-positive home, about masturbation she said:

Honestly, no, I don't even remember my parents mentioning it to me. I think they pretty much figured I would figure out myself. Which is like also a large part of my parents bringing me up, when talking about sex, it was a lot of, "We are going to lead you in the right direction, but you are going to figure it out yourself, right?" And I don't think masturbation is dangerous; that's what you mean by self-pleasure right?

The word dangerous stood out to me. At no point had I alluded to masturbation or sex as dangerous, or even mentioned that others might feel that way. Kelly even repeated that she did not think it was dangerous when I confirmed that I meant masturbation when I said self-pleasure. This exchange thus offers some insight into her thinking, suggesting that others might think of pleasure, whether with a partner or self-pleasure, as being a risky behaviour.

In 2005, Connell analyzed Ontario's then sex education curriculum to reveal how it emphasized the possible dangers of sex, its subliminal message of abstaining from sex, and its failure to talk about desire and pleasure. Her review of the curriculum is brought to life in my study, as my participants shared stories that align with her findings. As mentioned in chapter two, the new Ontario curriculum is more inclusive of topics, such as consent, sexual orientation, and sexting (Ontario, 2015). However, I think there is still a long way to go in order to teach a well-rounded, sufficient sex education to children and youth.

The missing discourse of desire is imbedded in many dominant discourses of childhood that frame girls as both asexual (Robinson, 2008; Flanagan, 2011; Surtees, 2005) and sexually innocent (Woodiwiss, 2014). As I noted in chapter one, asexual means to be devoid of sexuality, wherein to be sexually innocent means to be sexually immature, as sexuality is restricted to adulthood (Robinson, 2008). Both these discourses assume children, frequently girls, should not be exposed to sexual content. Thus, to talk about sexual pleasure and desire would challenge these dominant discourses, but also meet resistance from those who understand children to be both asexual and sexually innocent.

## Experiencing the Unknown

When young women and girls are taught that sex is for “when a man loves a woman” and there is a missing discourse of desire, a lot is left unknown. Multiple participants explained feeling scared or uncomfortable during sexual encounters, as they felt ill prepared for those experiences. At the end of our interview, Sarah wanted to reaffirm, “...like when I say I didn’t learn enough about sex, I definitely think that’s an issue because then when you do stuff, you don’t know what you’re expecting and I think the scariest thing is the unknown.” Sarah brought up a really good point, it is scary – sometimes terrifying – going into a situation not knowing what to expect, especially when all you do know is the negative consequences that could follow. Abby shared her feelings of fear during her first experience, “...or like at the time, I was like just talking to my boyfriend about it like, ‘I don’t know what to expect like I’m scared,’ you know what I mean?” And Dana echoed this feeling: “Yeah, yeah, like you didn’t know what to actually expect when it was actually happening.” Their experiences and feelings during and after their experiences exemplify how the sex education young people receive is not reflective of what they are actually experiencing, and therefore, puts young women in vulnerable situations. Sarah recalled the experience of the unknown in one of her first sexual experiences:

And like one of my first sexual experiences, I gave a guy a hand job, and no one ever told me in my life that guys came, I was not expecting that, and that that’s the end and that’s what happens. Um, no one told me that and so that was so scary! I thought something went wrong, I was so nervous. No one told me that!

Jillian talked about how she took her friend’s advice prior to her first sexual experience:

Yeah, like I don’t know, it’s different for everybody right, like I don’t know, I’m just going to go for it...so basically my friend mentioned the first time she’d ever seen a dick

and stuff like that, like, I don't know, how it went down, and how she gave him head and all that, I don't know like she just explained it, and when I tried to do stuff it just did not work, I don't know, it's messy sometimes.

Both Sarah and Jillian's early sexual experiences likely mirror the experiences of many people the first time they participate in sexual activities. Their stories emphasize how inadequate their sex education was prior to their sexual experiences, and that a lot of their sex education came from first-hand sexual experiences. Similarly, Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat, and Boislard-Pepin (2011) found that girls developed their understanding of themselves as sexual beings via consensual sexual experiences.

### **Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't**

The theme of slut-shaming was very prevalent in my data. The young women I interviewed shared stories about themselves and their peers who have been, and are, categorized by their sexual choices. Their narratives highlight how the virgin-slut binary is very prevalent for young women, as Hannah states: "Oh yeah, I would say kind of more for girls than guys, like girls can go from a virgin to a slut very quickly." The young women I interviewed expressed how both they and their friends found it difficult to navigate their sexual lives, as they did not want to be classified by their choices in these kinds of binary ways. Abby described her choices: "Um, well, I only like ever had sex with one person because I'm not, I just that's who I am, I don't want to have sex with just anybody, a one night stand, I'm not that kind of person..." What stands out is that last line, "I'm not that kind of person." Is she referring to the construct of the "slut"? A little later in the interview she explained to me how guys would ask her how many partners she had:

Yeah, it's very like, if you have too little you're not experienced enough but then if you have too much, you're a slut or you're just disgusting for a guy, so you have to have, there's only a certain number that's deemed acceptable, kind of thing, I don't know, that's different for everybody, but um, I just feel like yeah it's the better you are. Not that people will want to be with you more, it's just, "Oh so you know what you're doing," but at the same time if I were to say, "Oh ya, I have like 10 kills," people would be like, "You're such a slut!" But then if I were to say, "I have like 4," they'd be like, "Okay she knows what she's doing," you know what I mean? That's just what I think.

Abby's explanation emphasizes the pressure young women face when making sexual choices, as their choices are under surveillance by others. And the worst part of the virgin-slut binary? Other than the fact that your actions are constantly being observed and judged – there is no number that is deemed acceptable. In the quote above, Abby mentions that there is only a certain number that is acceptable; yet, it is an abstract number, with no concrete actuality.

**The Virgin.** So what does it mean to be the virgin? There is a lot of pressure and shame associated with being the virgin, as Dana shares:

Well like, my friend, she hasn't had sex before so she is still a virgin, and the guys, if they find that out they won't have sex with her because they don't want her to get attached to them so I feel like there is definitely pressure. And she feels bad, she's like, there's this one friend or this one girl that I know had sex with this guy, and my friend who hasn't had sex, likes this guy, and she's like, "What does that girl have that I don't?" And she's like it's because she's had sex before, so she feels really pressured that she needs to go have sex for the sake of being liked by guys. So I feel like there's DEFINITELY pressure on that.

Jillian and Hannah both talk about how there is pressure for young women to not attend university as a virgin, as Hannah explains about a girl from high school:

Hmm, it kind of could, cause I think if people are like concerned about their popularity in high school, like I know when I was in grade 12 we had our S-trip, like it's not the school trip it's just all the students go and I didn't go on it, but a girl I know, she went on it just to lose her virginity, that was her sole purpose of it, and I think, she was kind of like insecure, with maybe going to university still being a virgin.

Young women feel a lot of pressure to not go to university a virgin, as you are expected to be experienced and “explore,” as Jillian explained to me. These findings align with Orenstein (2016), who talked about how some of the young women she interviewed wanted to lose their virginity – not because they were pursuing their sexual desires, but because they did not want to be categorized as a virgin. As stated in chapter two, the virgin-slut binary results in the objectification of young women, as they potentially make their sexual choices based on other's opinions, thus, silencing female sexuality. However, the desire to not be a virgin while also not wanting to be a slut disrupts the virgin-slut binary, suggesting that there is an ideal space in-between. Yet, none of the participants in my study were able to identify what magical number of sexual partners would place you in this ideal space; thus, girls are still often categorized as either a virgin or a slut. The categorization of girls based on their sexual choices not only objectifies them, but reinforces dominant discourses. Girls who are categorized as “sluts” are no longer considered “pure” and “innocent; while girls who are identified as virgins feel excluded and stuck in the sphere of childhood, as Hannah explained above.

**The Sexual Double Standard.** A lot of my participants brought up the different set of sexual standards for young women and young men. Ira Reiss (1960) was the first researcher to

talk about the sexual double standard, exploring how premarital sex was prohibited for women, but not for men. Hannah explains:

Yeah people will not treat you with the same amount of respect if they see you as someone who is really sexual, as a girl. But as a guy, he would maybe get more, maybe not in a business sense, but they are definitely praised for their sexual actions, but girls are not.

Sarah echoes Hannah's comments:

Yeah, like one of my friends was talking to a guy and she had slept with 9 people I think, and he was like, "Oh that number's way too high," but he had slept with like 20, so numbers a lot higher, but it's way too high for a girl, whatever that means. Yeah, like a guy will say his number is 30, and people will be like, "Oh that's okay," but a girl will say their number is 10 or 15 and guys are like, "Oh no that's horrible!" It's definitely a huge double standard.

Sarah follows up with this explanation by expressing her frustration with the double standard: "But it's also ridiculous that guys have such a double standard, thinking girls should be having less sex, like why? Why is that a thing?" Why is it a thing? Well, one could state because of the discourses of childhood, but more specifically, because the discourse of childhood innocence tends to be more frequently associated with girls and young women. Thus, the sexual double standard exemplifies and perpetuates the sexist nature of the discourse of innocence.

### **Discourses of Childhood**

Throughout the themes and shared narratives, there is an underlying tone of the discourses of childhood. Although they are not explicitly stated, through the reflections and

recollections of experiences, it is quite apparent how the idea of childhood innocence, asexuality, and vulnerability shapes the sexual education young people receive, and in turn, their beliefs and experiences. After analyzing my main themes: 1) when a man loves a woman; 2) the missing discourse of desire; 3) experiencing the unknown; and 4) damned if you do, damned if you don't, I can see that there is a common thread linking them all together – the discourses of childhood.

My first theme highlights how young people are taught that sex is for when a man loves a woman and once they wed, thus, there is an overt message of abstinence-only until marriage. Why is this being taught in Ontario schools? As a lot of other researchers have found, adults view children as innocent, and sexual knowledge is an indicator of corrupted innocence (see Flanagan, 2011; Robinson, 2008; Woodiwiss, 2014). Western society associates childhood with innocence, and innocence almost always equals sexual innocence. This association constructs a powerful veneer of fear around young people – and girls, in particular – wherein children need to “be protected through denial of access” (Robinson, 2008, p. 121). Despite what adults think, when you talk to young people, like my participant Kelly, they feel children should not be sheltered: “Okay, well, like, I think that kids shouldn't be sheltered from sex because it's so normal.” Although, she also slightly contradicts this statement in her following sentence, “...And I mean there are certain parts to sex that maybe kids don't need to know about...” This statement suggests that adults should expose children to information and knowledge about sex, but limit it to age-appropriate content. I think this statement is an indicator of the biggest obstacle when implementing sex education: what is age-appropriate? Everyone's answer will vary based on their gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, culture, family values, what is being taught, etc., as childhood is a social construct, and therefore what is viewed as appropriate will likely vary across time and space. However, she also brings up an important conversation that is not often

shared amongst adults in relation to young people, which is that sex is normal, as well as sexual desires and sexuality.

This understanding is what is lacking in sex education when the participants of my study recalled where they learned about sex. The most predominant reflection is that they never really learned about it, because it is taboo to talk about it. As Dana stated:

Um, no, I don't think so. I mean, maybe now they do since they're learning from a younger age, but for us, like, a lot of the questions were unanswered because maybe it's awkward or the teachers aren't comfortable talking about it or parents even, aren't comfortable talking about stuff like that, cause it was like coming from a kid, they're like "What the heck, why are you asking me about that?" so I don't think they're educated enough. Especially when you're in a class learning, you don't want to ask the questions because you feel like people will judge you for that.

Her reflection indicates a vulnerability she felt as a girl, and a feeling a lot of young people have, because they are aware that adults do not believe children should know or be curious about sex. The presence of the dominant discourses of childhood not only influences how adults talk to young people and children (or more accurately, do not talk about it), but also how young people talk to adults about sex.

As explored in chapter two, young people live in a perpetual panopticon, where they have the sense of perpetual visibility, which, in turn, creates an omnipresent feeling of surveillance. The feelings of visibility and surveillance may cause young people to self-regulate their behaviour. Although the young people in my study did not indicate that they would change their behaviour based on adults' beliefs, three of my participants, Abby, Jillian and Sarah, consciously chose not to disclose their sexual experiences to their parents. When Jillian reflected on what she

would change about her sex education, she states, “Um, [pause], I don’t, I kind of feel like I wish I had more communication with my mom, or my parents in general, like yeah, like I don’t want to feel judged by them or anything so if I do, do anything I have to really keep it on the down low, and stuff..” She expressed her concern for being judged and categorized for her sexual choices, but also her desire to be able to talk about sex with her parents, without disappointing them. Jillian’s desire for more communication with her parents about sex is similar to a participant in Edwards’ (2016) study who always wished she had an open dialogue about sex with her parents, as it meant they were acknowledging her as a sexual being. This reflects the prevailing, dominant discourses of childhood, wherein girls feel an overt amount of pressure to maintain an image of innocence and asexuality. Jillian did not want to disappoint her parents by disrupting the discourse of childhood innocence, even though she recognized herself as a sexual being.

### **Sexual Subjectivity**

At the end of my interviews I was left to reflect on the sexual subjectivity of my participants, which is a term often used in research to describe young women and girls’ sexual expression and experiences (Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat, & Boislard-Pepin, 2011) and their sense of themselves as sexual actors. So, do the participants in my study have sexual subjectivity? There is no simple answer. Their narratives share a similar story, which is the complexity of young women having sexual subjectivity, as it is compromised by the adult-child binary, wherein children are seen as becoming and are conflated with innocence, asexuality, and vulnerability. Thus, the dominant discourses of childhood, which are mostly gendered discourses, create a barrier between young women and sexual subjectivity. In fact, Zimmer-Gembeck and French

(2014) conducted a quantitative study comparing sexual subjectivity amongst young men and young women, and concluded that "...men reported greater entitlement to self-pleasure and self-efficacy in achieving pleasure, but women reported greater entitlement to pleasure with partners" (p. 325). Although, their research suggests that women may report higher entitlement to pleasure, they note that this is contrary to other research, and state that women "...may feel, perceive, or report themselves to be more entitled than they appear to observers given their experiences or behavior" and "it may be they face more challenges than men in facilitating their own experience of pleasure with partners" (Zimmer-Gembeck and French, 2014, p. 324). Their study does state that men feel more entitled to pleasure than women and that young men are more likely to achieve pleasure during sexual experiences. What is interesting is that women report feelings of less efficacy yet more entitlement – the two slightly contradict one another, suggesting that although they feel entitlement, this may not be a reflection of their actual experiences.

It is no surprise that most of the participants in my study seemed to struggle with sexual subjectivity, as most of their sex education focused on the negative consequences associated with sex, and not about understanding oneself as a sexual being with desires and sexual needs. This lack of sexual subjectivity is reflected in Kelly's recollection of her early sexual experiences with her boyfriend, "I know it happened, but it was just like so, just, I think it was what they teach you in high school, it's just you're just having sex so that the man can do his thing, and you just kind of lay there, like okay." She spoke about how she cannot really remember much about her early sexual experiences, and that she is aware they happened, but that they were not memorable for her. She has attributed her lack of memories to the lack of pleasure she felt during those experiences.

When Kelly talked about her present day sexual experiences, she talked about how her and her current boyfriend have “levelled things out” regarding pleasure during sexual experiences. Her shift in expectations suggests that Kelly’s sexual subjectivity has grown since high school, but it is unclear if it is due to maturation, age, or experience; Kelly believes it is partly due to her current boyfriend, since he is older and more experienced. In addition to Kelly highlighting how her expectations during sex have changed, indicating sexual subjectivity, she was the most comfortable of all the participants when it came to talking about sex and using “explicit” language, which also indicates sexual subjectivity. As Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006) explain, being aware of internal aspects of sexuality, such as sexual feelings, desires, and preferences are indicators of sexual subjectivity, but also being comfortable having conversations about sex.

Many of my participants were hesitant to use more explicit language when talking about various sexual beliefs and behaviours. As quoted previously, in experiencing the unknown, Jillian stated, “Yeah, like I don’t know, it’s different for everybody right, like I don’t know, I’m just going to go for it...so basically my friend mentioned the first time she’d ever seen a dick...”. Jillian was very hesitant to talk openly and freely about a conversation she had with a friend, as she did not know if it was appropriate to talk about sex with me. However, her story also indicates that she is comfortable talking about sex with close friends. Why was she hesitant to use that language with me? Is it because I am older than her? Or is it because I am a stranger? Or is it because it would be recorded into my data? It really is impossible to know, however, it is likely because of the prevailing discourses of childhood innocence, asexuality, vulnerability, and children as “becoming”. It is likely that Jillian did not feel comfortable to share her story as it suggests she has sexual curiosity and desires, which defies the discourses of childhood.

I think it is difficult to answer if the participants in my study had sexual subjectivity because when they reflected on their high school experience, and early sexual experiences, there was an obvious lack of sexual subjectivity. However, when they recalled more recent experiences or talked about their current beliefs, you could see a shift in their understanding of sex, and themselves, as sexual beings. Even within the interview, through our conversations, you can sense a growth in understanding themselves as sexual beings. All my participants agreed that no one ever talked to them about pleasure or desire, as deconstructed in the missing discourse of desire, but a lot of them had not realized how this conversation had been missing until I asked about it. In some of the interviews I almost felt as though I saw a light bulb go off over top of them, as if they were thinking, “Wow why was I not taught about pleasure and desire?” However, to clarify, there was no light bulb, but a slight shift in their body language, a slight look of wonder, and a moment of reflection. Thinking of sexual subjectivity as a gas tank is a useful analogy; having sexual subjectivity is a full tank and having little subjectivity would be an empty tank. Through conversations, lessons, and positive experiences, we can fill the tank.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

When I began this project, I set out to answer the following research questions: When young women at an Ontario University reflect on how and what they learned about sex, what do they recall? How do young women at an Ontario University feel that their learned knowledge about sex has shaped their understanding of their sexual identify, sex lives, sexual desires, and abstinence? I wanted to hear the narratives of young women as they recalled their experiences growing up, as well as their current experiences. The narratives, as told throughout this thesis, highlight the existing gap between what young people are being taught and what they are experiencing. Within formal education, there is a hyper-focus on the consequences associated with sex and a lack of conversation about desire, homosexuality, gender fluidity, consent, and pleasure. When I asked my participants how they would want their children to learn about sex, all of them expressed how they want to ensure their children are provided with more knowledge and information regarding sex and sexuality than they were. Most felt that as a parent, it would be their responsibility to ensure their children were better informed than they were as children, but they also felt that school needs to more adequately educate children and youth. Their wish for their future children is a reflection of what they felt was missing from their own sex education, whether it be from school or parents, and therefore indicative that children and youth need and want a more all-inclusive sex education.

### Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to my study that are worth mentioning. First, my participants all identified as heterosexual females, with a Western background. It was my intent to have a more diverse group of participants representing various sexualities, “race”, and socioeconomic

statuses; however, despite my efforts this was not achievable. In addition to not having a diverse group of self-identified females, my study also purposely excluded self-identified males. This was because I wanted to understand the experiences of young women, which generally varies from those of young men. Although, it would be very interesting to conduct a similar study with both young women and young men in order to compare the differences in their sex education.

Second, because my study is about young women reflecting on how they learned about sex, it is not an observation of their actual interactions with peers, teachers, and parents. How a participant retells their childhood may be more a reflection of their adulthood than an accurate retelling of what “actually” happened (Albanese, 2009). However, the focus on memory enriches my study. How participants recall learning about sex is more important than what was actually said to them, as it is what they remember that matters most. As well, since I interviewed young women (ages 18 and 19), many of their childhood experiences are not a distant memory, but more recent.

Third, the participants in my study reflected on their experiences with the old sexual health education in schools, prior to the 2015 update. Therefore, some of the information they felt was lacking in their education may be more present in classrooms today.

And finally, I recognize that the research was collected, transcribed, and analyzed solely by me. Thus, my own bias and interpretation has a presence within the study. However, as stated in my methodology, when conducting a deconstructive discourse analysis the researcher does not take the traditional role of the “‘knowers’ or ‘measurers’ of human beings and their behaviour” (Macleod, 2002, p. 20). The researcher’s role is to be an expert in asking questions and analyzing the data. When analyzing the data, it was important that my bias did not have an imposing role, thus, I took the utmost care in allowing the data to speak for itself. However, it is important to

acknowledge that it is nearly impossible to remove all researcher bias, but by being aware of its presence and by being systematic in my data analysis, I tried to ensure that I did not miss anything overt based on my own interests and interpretations.

Despite the limitations of my study, I believe my study offers an insightful understanding of the lived experiences of young women regarding sexual health education and sexual experiences. My qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews allowed for me to explore my research questions with flexibility and for the “interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). Through my data analysis, I was able to weave together the six narratives of my participants and present a strong understanding of their experiences.

### **Media Influence**

Although my study did not focus on how the media teaches young people about sex, or influences young people’s beliefs and experiences, it is a notable factor. In my interviews, I asked my participants how they felt media influences young people, explaining how many people believe that media have inappropriate content and messages (see Table 1). This question seemed to bring about a variety of opinions, as Abby stated:

Ya, I agree, cause there’s all those things when I was 12-years-old versus the 12-year-olds now a days, and it’s like they’re in crop tops and all this stuff, and my face was orange with make up because I didn’t know how to apply and now they’re like...it’s so different...I feel like as girls we feel like we need to meet a certain expectation or a certain standard or else we won’t be seen as attracted by guys, and we crave attention from guys especially at a young age because we’re trying to act older than we actually are, like in high school and things like that, the girls when I went to high school I didn’t

do half the stuff they did or know half the stuff they do, and I feel like media has a huge influence on that.

Abby's opinion is interesting because she recognizes how the media influences young women and girls, as well as recognizing the access to knowledge it brings, which would otherwise not be accessible to young women and girls. Sarah also acknowledged the role of the media: "Well media kind of sexualizes young girls, like, a lot," whereas Kelly seemed to have a more critical approach to the conversation: "Ya, like why are we sexualizing children; they shouldn't be sexualized for wearing no clothes or whatever." Although Abby and Sarah recognize the sexualization of young women and girls in the media, Kelly further critiques sexualization in the media.

According to the APA Task Force, sexualization can be understood as when a person's value is derived exclusively from their sexual appeal or behaviour; when a person's physical attractiveness is equated to their sexiness; a person is sexually objectified; and lastly, when sexuality is forced upon a person. Across all forms of media, there is a prevailing presence of sexualization of young women and girls (APA Task Force). Sexualization can have a variety of consequences on women and girls, across all domains, including cognitive, emotional, physical and mental (APA Task Force). The APA Task Force explains how regular exposure to sexualization can influence women/girls' attitudes and beliefs about their sexual identity and value, viewing themselves as sexual objects. Importantly, however, this Task Force draws attention to only one facet of the role of media in girls' lives, and does not take resistance, pleasure, or complex interactions and negotiations into account. But to delve into these multifaced roles of media in influencing girls and young women would be to extend beyond the purpose of this study.

Some of the participants in my study briefly acknowledged the sexualization of girls in the media, while others acknowledged that the content in media is not always age appropriate, but we did not fully explore the role of media. Media is not often viewed as a more formal form of sex education and seems to have a more subliminal role in influencing young women and girls' sexual beliefs and choices. Thus, for the purpose of this study, I chose to not explore the role of the media as I wanted to focus on the more explicit forms of sex education.

### **Implications and Future Research**

There are a few notable implications of my study. First, I hope to contribute to research on young women and sexual subjectivity. I plan to publish my project in the hopes that my participants' narratives will add to the research on young women and sexual agency by highlighting the gap between what girls and young women are learning and what they are experiencing. I also hope that through this contribution, my thesis plays a role in influencing curricula. As mentioned, the curriculum was updated in 2015 (after my participants finished high school), however, I believe more changes need to be made in order to meet the needs of students. In general, the curricula needs to be more sex-positive, inclusive, and accessible to all children and youth of all backgrounds and sexualities.

Last, and most importantly, I hope my research starts conversations about sex and alleviates the tension that arises when sex and young people are brought up in the same conversation. In my own life, I have seen how powerful this paradigm shift can be. When people ask me about my research, and I "ease" into the conversation to ensure I am not disrupting someone's opinions or beliefs rudely (as you never know someone's personal beliefs about education young people about sex), more often than not, people start to open up to me about their own personal stories about learning about sex, or their first time having sex, or an awkward

sexual encounter due to their lack of education. By creating a safe space, judgement free space, where it is not taboo to talk about sex and sexuality, people begin to have healthy conversations about sex.

It would be beneficial for future studies to build on this study by recruiting a larger group of self-identified females, who represent a more diverse population, including a diverse representation of “race,” culture, religion, and sexuality. It would be interesting for future researchers to conduct the same study with self-identified males. Future research with self-identified males would complement my research and open up discussion about how young people are learning about sex, how this is shaping their beliefs and experiences, and how sex education can be improved. Lastly, I believe it would be valuable to understand the experiences of educators and what they need to effectively teach sex education.

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Invitation

**Date:**

**Title of Study:** The Sex Chronicles: Young Women's Recollections of Learning About Sex

**Principal Student Investigator (PSI):** Katrien Ecclestone, Graduate Student, Child and Youth Department, Brock University

**Faculty Supervisor:** Shauna Pomerantz, Supervisor, Child and Youth Department, Brock University

I, Katrien Ecclestone, from the Department of Child and Youth Studies, Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled *The Sex Chronicles: Young Women's Recollections of Learning about Sex*.

The purpose of this research project is to look at how young women learn about sex and how this shapes the negotiations of their sex lives. Should you choose to participate, you will participate in an individual interview, based on questions that pertain to how you learned about sex, such as: *Did you and your parents openly communicate about sex? Can you recall what you learned in sex education?*

The interview date will be decided at the convenience of both the interviewee and the PSI, and it will be approximately 60-90 minutes in length. All interviews will take place in a bookable space on campus. I will be using an audio recorder from the Child and Youth Studies department. I will upload the interviews to my computer and delete them from the audio recorder so that they are no longer on a portable device. I will then transcribe the data into a Word document with no identifiers, such as your real name. All the data will be in a locked folder on my computer that only I will have access to through a password. Written data will be stored securely in a locked drawer. Access to data will be restricted to Katrien Ecclestone. All data will be deleted following the submission of my thesis and any related publications.

There are possible, albeit minimal, risks associated with participation, including feelings of embarrassment, shame, and sadness when re-visiting past or describing present experiences. A list of helpful resources will be provided should you require help dealing with these emotions. You may decline to answer any questions, or withdraw from the interview at any time. There are no direct benefits of my study, but some positive effects include: insight into your own experiences, having a chance to discuss your opinions, and learning how research is done vis-à-vis the interview process.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Office (905 688-5550 ext 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca)).

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,  
Katrien Ecclestone

**Principal Investigator (SPI):** *Katrien Ecclestone*

Department of Child and Youth

Brock University

**Email:** [ke10st@brocku.ca](mailto:ke10st@brocku.ca)

**Faculty Supervisor:** *Shauna Pomerantz*

Department of Child and Youth

Brock University

(905) 688-5550 Ext. 5371; **Email:** [spomerantz@brocku.ca](mailto:spomerantz@brocku.ca)

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board [REB file number: 16-238].

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

**Date:**

**Project Title:** : The Sex Chronicles: Ontario Girls Recollection of Learning About Sex and Sexual Experiences

**Principal Student Investigator (PSI):**

Katrien Ecclestone  
Department of Child and Youth  
Brock University

**Email:** *ke10st@brocku.ca*

**Faculty Supervisor:** *Shauna Pomerantz*

(Overseeing the PSI's Master's thesis)

Department of Child and Youth  
Brock University

(905) 688-5550 Ext. 5371; **Email:** *spomerantz@brocku.ca*

### INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a study

### WHAT'S INVOLVED

You will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded interview, based on questions that pertain to how you learned about sex and how this shaped the negotiations of your sex life.

The interview time and day will be decided at the convenience of the participants, and will last approximately 60-90 minutes. All interviews will take place in a bookable space on the Brock University campus.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

You may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time. There are possible, albeit minimal, risks associated with participation, including feelings of embarrassment, shame, and sadness when re-visiting past experiences. A list of helpful resources will be provided should you require help dealing with these emotions. Current Brock students may also access counselling services at the University:

***Brock On-Campus Counselling Services: Phone: 905-688-5550 ext. 4750***

***Website: <http://www.brocku.ca/personal-counselling>***

***Distress Centre Niagara - Crisis Line: 905-688-3711***

There are no direct benefits of my study, but benefits to participating in this research include gaining insight into your own experiences, having a chance to discuss your opinions, and learning how research is done vis-à-vis the interview process.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

The information you provide will be kept confidential. As pseudonyms will be used, your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study (this will also include changes to any specific locations, or identifying hobbies etc. that may come up in the interview).

I will be using an audio recorder from the Child and Youth Studies department. I will upload the interviews to my computer and delete them from the audio recorder so they are no longer in a portable device, I will then transcribe the data into a Word document without identifying names. All the data will be in a locked folder on my computer that only I will have access to through a password. Written data will be stored securely in a locked drawer. Access to data will be restricted to Katrien Ecclestone. All data will be deleted following the submission of my thesis and any subsequent publications.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any question or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty. The audio files will be securely deleted and any documents will be shredded.

**PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

This research is for a Master's graduate thesis paper and any subsequent publications. If you are interested in receiving a summary of my findings, which will be available summer of 2017, please contact Katrien Ecclestone at [ke10st@brocku.ca](mailto:ke10st@brocku.ca) or print your email address here:

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

For further information, feel free to contact me. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [REB file number: ]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

*Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.*

**CONSENT**

I agree to participate in the study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Feedback Form

Thank you for participating in my study. While it is not anticipated that any risks should happen while participating, if the study has triggered any negative thoughts or feelings, the following resources are available to you for help.

**Brock On-Campus Counselling Services:** 500 Glenridge Avenue St. Catharines, ON, L2S 3A1 (Schmon Tower - ST400)  
Phone: 905-688-5550 ext. 4750  
Hours of Operation: Monday – Friday; 8:30am - 4:30pm.

**Distress Centre Niagara:** St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Area  
24/7 Crisis Line: 905-688-3711

**Niagara Region Sexual Assault Centre:** 43 Church Street, Suite 503, St. Catharines, ON, L2R 7E1  
Business Line: (905) 682-7258  
24 HR Crisis Line: (905) 682-4584

**Gillian's Place:** 15 Gibson Place, St. Catharines, ON, L2R 0A3  
Shelter Front Desk: 905-684-4000 ext. 221  
24/7 Support Line: 905-684-8331

**There are a number of on-campus services that are open to all students. If you need help in locating those services, I would be more than willing to help.**

*Sincerely,*

***Katrien Ecclestone***

Email: [ke10st@brocku.ca](mailto:ke10st@brocku.ca)

Shauna Pomerantz (Faculty Supervisor)  
Phone: (905)688-5550 Ext. 5371  
Email: [spomerantz@brocku.ca](mailto:spomerantz@brocku.ca)

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board [REB file number: 16-238]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).)

