

2010

# Reconstructing Sex: Women Having Sex With Women

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*Your file* *Votre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-68725-3  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-68725-3

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**Reconstructing Sex: Women Having Sex With Women**

BY

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Honours Bachelor of Arts Psychology

University of Ottawa, 2008

THESIS

Submitted to the Department of Psychology  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Masters of Arts Degree  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
2010

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experience of exclusion from the dominant understandings of sex for women who have sex with women, including queer, pansexual, bisexual, and lesbian women. Using ideas of the constructed nature of sex, particularly the use of sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1973), as well as the (hetero)sexist context in which these scripts are formed, qualitative interviews with 11 queer, pansexual, bisexual, and lesbian women were analyzed regarding their development of their understandings of what constitutes sex, their expectations and experiences of sex, their negotiation of desire and sexual identity, and their perspectives on sex between women and their sexual identities as resistance to dominant (hetero)sexist norms. These data are discussed in relation to the constructs of (hetero)sexism, agency, and third space.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Robb Travers, for all of his help. I'm very grateful for his support of my finding and following my passion, and for his guidance along the way. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Colleen Loomis and Dr. Jeffery Aguinaldo, for their guidance and their flexibility.

Many thanks to all the people who helped organize interview logistics, including Anna Penner, Adrian Guta, Dr. June Larkin, Susan Flynn, and Brody Giambrone, The headache of interviewing in Toronto while living in Waterloo was greatly lessened with the help of such giving people.

Thank you as well to my friends and roommates who supported me along the way, particularly Katie Cook, whose g-chats got me through many a crisis, and Jody Miller, for his love and support.

Finally, I would like to thank all my participants for their openness and willingness to talk with me about their lives and their ideas.

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## **Reconstructing Sex: Women Having Sex with Women**

The Freudian paradigm of sexuality posited that sex is an innate act, and that sexuality is a fundamental life force that is repressed, distorted, but most importantly, controlled by society (Freud, 1949). When combined with a patriarchal society, this paradigm has clear, negative results for the cultural prescriptions placed on women's sexuality, exemplified in the prevalence of purity balls, virginity pledges, the stud/slut double standard, the virgin/whore paradox, the representation and vilification of the "fallen woman" archetype, beauty pageants, and the high incidence of (but low intervention rate for) violence against women. While the Freudian paradigm has been rejected in sexology in favour of social constructivism, the ramifications of the dominant cultural understanding of sex continues to inform how sex is enacted and experienced.

In this thesis, I outline how sex is a constructed act, how that construction is primarily formed by sex scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1973), how these scripts are formed in a context of (hetero)sexism<sup>1</sup> the (hetero)sexist effects of the scripts, the constrained agency of individuals within these scripts, an outline of research regarding sex between women, and the double vision (Haraway, 1988) of women who have sex with women within the dominant (hetero)sexist framework of sex. Within this framework, the research will examine the experience of exclusion from the dominant sex script for women who have sex with women. This thesis focuses on dominant sex scripts within Western, patriarchal culture. I focus on literature from this culture, particularly works published in English and those published within Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Western Europe.

While the disruptive power of identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer has been well researched (e.g., Butler, 1990), the disruptive power of the act of sex between women has

not, and thus this research will focus on the understandings, expectations, experience and meanings associated with sex between women.

The expression “women who have sex with women” is the recent re-working of the term “men who have sex with men”, which was coined by social epidemiologists who recognized that not all men who have sex with men identify as gay, bisexual, or queer (Glick Shiller, Crystal, & Lewellen, 1994). Thus, to include all men who had sex with men in their HIV/AIDS studies and interventions, they focused on sexual behaviour rather than sexual identities. As identification as a lesbian, bisexual, or queer woman does not completely overlap with sexual experience with women (Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1995; Rothblum, 2000), this thesis will focus on the experiences of women who have had sex with women, which in this study, included the experiences of women who identified as queer, pansexual, lesbian, and bisexual (QPBL). This type of approach has been criticized for its sole focus on behaviour, as well as for potentially ‘de-politicizing and erasing’ the sexual orientations of people who are not heterosexual (Young & Meyer, 2005). However, the current research will be examining the act of sex in context, and thus will examine the importance of sexual identity in the meaning associated with sex. I will use the expression “women who have sex with women” in order to focus on the experience of sex with women, and will use QPBL (queer, pansexual, bisexual, lesbian) to discuss the sexual identities of the participants. It is important to note that “women who have sex with women” overlaps with “women who have sex with men”: many of the participants in this study have had sex with men, and some desire sex with men as well as with women. Finally, as very little research has been focused on women who have sex with women, some of the literature I review describes the experiences of only lesbian women. While lesbian sexuality cannot be used to

represent the experiences and identities of all women who have sex with women, I use it in cases where it is the most relevant research that currently exists.

### **The Construction of Sex**

In opposition to the Freudian sexual paradigm, Foucault (1978) argued that sexuality is not an innate property of individuals that is repressed and distorted by societal influences. Instead, he argued that sexuality is socially produced through discourse regarding what kinds of sexuality are acceptable, desirable and possible. Foucault argued that the naturalization of sexuality was a deliberate attempt to obscure the influence of power in the production of sexuality. He argued that there was a rise in the construction and regulation of sexuality in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, through the rise of the power of the state, and the focus on 'bio-power' or the management of population and health (Foucault, 1978). While discussing the rising power of the state, Foucault used La Mothe Le Vayer's typology of government (1991) separating government into three nested levels (self, family, and state), to show that 'governance' occurs at many levels, not simply at the state level.

### **Sex Scripts**

The notion that governance is divided between these three nested levels was strongly incorporated by Simon and Gagnon (1973) into their theoretical description of sex scripts. Sex scripts are narratives that outline the elements, sequence, and meaning of sexual behaviours. Scripts provide a framework for understanding sexuality which are interpreted and enacted by individuals, and thus are both dynamic and contextual. This framework shapes how individuals recognize situations as being sexual, including with whom and when sex is appropriate, what effects sex is meant to have on an individual, and which sex acts should occur and in what order

(Gagnon & Simon, 1987). The last of these questions was clearly outlined by Gagnon and Simon in their description of the script for sex:

Kissing, tongue kissing, manual and oral caressing of the body, particularly the female breasts, manual and oral contacts with both the female and male genitalia, usually in this sequence, followed by intercourse in a number of positions are part of the repertoire of intrapsychic and interpersonal sexual scripts of the heterosexual majority in Western cultural regions. (p. 2)

Sex scripts exist at three levels: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic (Simon & Gagnon, 1973). These three levels range in proximity to the individual. The most distal level of scripts are the cultural scripts, which are the dominant narratives of sex. They provide a stockpile of information regarding sex for individuals to draw upon in constructing their understanding of sex. The ideas contained in the dominant cultural script are institutionalized through the portrayal of gender roles and sexuality in the mass media and through the pathologization of deviance through the psychiatric system, and sex therapy; taught through sexual education within schools; and enshrined into the judicial system through legislature regarding sexual assault, age of consent, marriage and child care. At this level, individuals are seen to have no agency: they simply play the role of the audience. However, this does not mean that scripts entirely dictate what sex will be: scripts are generalized understandings of sex that must be interpreted and enacted by individuals, necessitating the next two more proximal levels of scripts. The first of these are the interpersonal scripts, which are the understandings of sex that are constructed between two or more individuals over time. At this level, individuals enact, interpret, and modify the cultural script in their role as actors, revisionists, and playwrights. The meanings of the interpersonal interactions are interpreted at the most proximal level of the sex script, the intrapsychic script. This script outlines an individual's understanding of what sex is and what sex means. At the intrapsychic level, individuals again play the role of audience, but

also of critic and utopian, where they imagine their ideal script for sex. Thus, while both the interpersonal and intrapsychic sex scripts are strongly influenced by the cultural level sex script, individuals modify and adapt the scripts based on their experience and context. Context refers to the particulars of the situation and physical environment immediately surrounding the individual during a sex.

While cultural level sex scripts (which I also refer to as dominant sex scripts) inform the creation of interpersonal and intrapsychic sex scripts, they do not entirely prescribe these more proximal scripts: based on cultural location and individual circumstance, individuals can alter and reject various parts of the dominant script. Further, dominant scripts are not static: as an example, Gagnon and Simon (1987) discuss changes to the cultural level sex scripts to include oral sex. They discuss the influences of representation of oral sex in media, inclusion of discussion of oral sex in textbooks and sex manuals, and jokes and cartoons about oral sex in changing the script to include oral sex, contextualizing this discussion in an analysis of larger changes to sex scripts that legitimized pre-marital companionate sex, and linking the change in cultural script to changes to reported sexual behaviours, demonstrating the mutual influence and dynamic nature of cultural and interpersonal scripts.

### **(Hetero)sexism of Sex Scripts**

While individuals interpret cultural level scripts based on their context, the cultural scripts themselves are both constituted of and constitute their context. One of the first people to connect the interpersonal and individual level phenomena of sexual relationships and sexual desire to societal institutions and power was Rich (1980). Rich argued that heterosexuality was not an individual and inter-individual phenomenon; instead, she argued it to be “an institution from which there is no choice” (p. 22). She labeled this phenomenon “compulsory

heterosexuality”, and argued that it is maintained through socialization, institutionalization, and normalization. Like Foucault (1978), she argued that the naturalization of heterosexuality obscured the role of power in the production of the concept of heterosexuality.

The (hetero)sexist understanding of sexuality that Rich (1980) describes is clearly represented in the cultural level sex script: Laws and Schwartz (1977)’s text “Sexual Scripts” reinterprets Simon and Gagnon’s (1973) scripting theory to elucidate how the sex script clearly outlines prescriptions for femininity, and thus for ‘gendered’ sexual behaviour. In her (re)visioning of compulsory heterosexuality, Tolman (2006) also stresses the importance of examination of gender within sex scripts. She states that scripts “provide a script not only for how males and females interact, but also for expectations about female and male (hetero)sexuality, including [making the] distinction between good and bad girls” (p. 81). Despite societal change since the 1970s, Tolman, Kim, Schooler, and Sorsoli’s (2007) descriptions of the dominant sex script echoes that of Laws and Schwartz, including the devaluing of women’s agency and the complementary framing of women’s power as the ability to manipulate men’s desire for themselves; the overvaluing and hyper-sexualization of men’s desire; the devaluing and de-sexualizing of women’s desires; the construction of women as objects for men’s sexual pleasure; the construction of women as gatekeepers who are responsible for the occurrence and consequences of sex; and the commodification of women’s sexuality and of their bodies.

Rich’s (1980) description of compulsory heterosexuality highlights both the sexism and the heterosexism inherent to a system that is predicated upon men’s “sex-right” to women’s bodies. However, the impact of both sexism and heterosexism is not equivalent for all women, as is made clear in Crenshaw (1991)’s description of the concept of ‘intersectionality’.



Crenshaw describes how the effect of membership in different oppressed groups is not simply additive: instead, different forms of oppression affect the experience of others. Collins (2009) illustrates this in her description of the sexual politics of women of colour: she highlights how the objectification of women as sexual objects is mediated by race, where White women are portrayed as pure, Black women as sexually voracious, and Asian women as passive. The differential sexualization of women is also clear in the asexualization of both disabled women and elderly women, and the delegitimization of lesbian's sexual desire through the exploitation of 'lesbian imagery' that is presented for heterosexual male viewers (Jackson, 2009). The combination of many different requirements for an idealized form of sexuality was made explicit in Rubin's (1993) description of the "charmed circle". She describes the idealized form of sex as being heterosexual; between a married, monogamous couple; procreative; non-commercial; between individuals of the same generation; private; without the use of pornography or other non-corporal tools; and vanilla. To this list, one could add: cisgender<sup>2</sup>, young, White, intraracial, able-bodied, and upper middle class. These restrictive parameters regarding ideal sex are also enmeshed within (hetero)sexist ideals regarding femininity. Tolman (2006) further explicates the (hetero)sexism of the dominant sex script in her discussion of hegemonic femininity: she highlights how an intrinsic part of compulsory heterosexuality is the promotion and normalization of a single and hegemonic standard of femininity that includes passivity, niceness, and conflict avoidance.

The idea that femininity and gender itself are constructed originated with Simone de Beauvoir (1949), who famously argued that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one". Butler (1990) later rejected de Beauvoir's proposition, instead arguing that one never becomes a woman, but is instead in a perpetual act of becoming. Thus, femininity is an active process of

“doing”, where many different behaviours and standards are maintained to “perform” womanhood. However, she does not believe this to be a voluntary process: she argues instead that there is no inner essence of sex (e.g., male and female) that gender is laid over. Here Butler also diverged with de Beauvoir by arguing that sex (e.g., male and female) is also a social construct, and that the dichotomization of sex and gender combines to form a “heterosexual matrix”, that naturalizes the progress from sex to gender to heterosexuality. Thus, Butler argues that heterosexuality is an integral part of the “performance” as a woman. Tolman (2006) echoes Butler’s supposition in her discussion of how women’s behaviours and desires are actively constructed to meet the desires and interests of (heterosexual) men.

### **(Hetero)sexist Effects of Sex**

As the dominant cultural sex scripts are (hetero)sexist, they are circular in their (hetero)sexist effects. These include narrowing what is considered to be sex, devaluing women’s pleasure and desire, narrowing women’s agency and devaluing their consent, creating paradoxes that overvalue and devalue women’s sexuality simultaneously, and creating a culture of silence regarding sex between women.

**What is considered to be sex.** A fundamental impact of the dominant level sex script is a narrowing of what is considered to be “sex”. The description of the dominant sex script previously mentioned by Gagnon and Simon (1987) clearly emphasized the manner in which penile-vaginal intercourse is centered in dominant sex scripts as the final, most important, type of sex act. This centering of penile-vaginal intercourse was mirrored in Masters and Johnson’s (1966) classic model of the human sexual response cycle, which also framed orgasm from penile-vaginal intercourse as the goal of sex. The centering of penile-vaginal intercourse

devalues other forms of sexual activity: notably, those that women most often engage in during sex with women.

In a study of American university students, Hans, Gillenand, and Akande (2010) found that 98% of the students considered penile-vaginal intercourse to be sex, 78% considered penile-anal intercourse to be sex, 20% considered oral-genital contact to be sex, 13% of men and 7% of women considered manual stimulation of genitals to be sex, and 9% of men and 4% of women considered contact with nipples/breasts to be sex. In comparison, in studies of Australian and American women who have sex with women, sexual activities between women most often comprise of oral-genital contact and manual stimulation of genitals: both activities were reported by up to 98% of respondents (McNair, 2005). While there is no research on what women who have sex with women define to be sex, it is clear that the types of sexual activities most commonly engaged in during sex between women are not as frequently considered to be sex as those generally restricted to heterosexual individuals. Further, the dominant understanding of sex appears to be narrowing: when Hans, Gillen and Akande (2010) compared their current findings to data collected in 1991, the number of individuals currently believing oral-genital contact and manual stimulation of genitals to be sex were 50% lower than they were in 1991.

**Devaluing women's pleasure and desire.** This devaluing of sexual activities most commonly occurring between women can be linked to confusion among women who are attracted to women regarding their sexual desires, and to a broader devaluing of women's pleasure. The heterosexist definition of sex can impede the ability of women to define their desires for other women as sexual: one of Tolman's (2002) participants exemplifies this in her description of her inability to picture herself sexually interacting with another women:

You can picture yourself kissing a guy, but then if you like a girl a lot and then you picture yourself kissing her, it's just like, I can't, you know, oh my God, no

[laughs], you know it's like scary...it's society...you never would think of, you know, it's natural to kiss a girl. (p. 114)

The inability to imagine sexual activity between women was also noted by Kitzinger and Wilkinson: "Women related to men or —*blank*—there was nothingness" (1995).

The (hetero)sexist effects of centering sexual activities generally restricted to heterosexual individuals are clear in the creation of the myth of the vaginal orgasm. In her landmark article "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm", Koedt (1996) argued that vaginal orgasms, heralded by the formerly-dominant Freudian paradigm of sexuality as the "mature" form of orgasm (in contrast to the "immature" clitoral orgasm), were a construction used to justify the definition of sex as penile-vaginal intercourse. The myth of the vaginal orgasm was completely disproved by Masters and Johnson (1966) who, in their studies of the physiology of sex, found that all female orgasms are clitoral, including orgasms caused by penile-vaginal intercourse, which were found to indirectly stimulate the clitoris.

The impact of the definition of sex as penile-vaginal clearly centers male pleasure, as evidenced in its disparity of rate of orgasm for women and men. Penile-vaginal intercourse is more effective at stimulating men than women to orgasm: in their classic studies of sexuality, Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) found that 75% of men can orgasm from two minutes of penile-vaginal intercourse, while Hite (1976) found that only 30% of women regularly had orgasms from penile-vaginal intercourse of any duration. This disparity in pleasure associated with intercourse is also reflected in the emotions women and men ascribe to their first sexual experience. Thompson (1995) found that 75% of women report their first experience with sex as disappointing, painful, and boring, while men are more likely to associate positive emotions and meaning to their first sexual experience.

The devaluing of women's desires also has impacts on women's own conceptions of the relative importance of their desires: Phillips (2000) describes how this disconnection between women and their desires can also pervade sexual activity. The women in Phillips' study describe a process of separating themselves from their corporal sensations, which results in the watching of themselves having sex from the omnipresent third party perspective of the male gaze. The women reported responding more on the basis of what they believe will excite their partners than based on their own physical sensations.

Sexist ideas regarding women's sexual desires being less intense or less important than men's also has clear negative effects for women who have sex with women: the myth of "lesbian bed death" presumes that as women are less innately sexually driven than men, sex will "naturally" diminish substantially in relationships between women. Iasenza (2000, 2002) strongly argues against this myth, showing that the sexual activity and sexual satisfaction of women in relationships with women is often not adequately captured in research (owing to (hetero)sexist frameworks of sex), and that women in relationships with women have similar patterns of sexual activity across relationships as women in relationships with men. In her description of why the myth of "lesbian bed death" is perpetuated in academia, Iasenza (2000) cites many authors, including Angier (1999), MacDonald (1998), and Schwartz (1998), who explicitly support the idea that "lesbian bed death" is logical, as there "is no man in the relationship to ensure initiation of sexual activity" (p. 59).

**Narrowing women's agency and devaluing consent.** The devaluing of women's desires can also be connected to the narrowing of women's agency in sex and ultimately to the devaluing of their consent. The narrowing of women's agency can occur when women's desire for sex is diminished, and women are framed as the gatekeepers of sex. This phenomena is

discussed by Tolman (2006), who describes how women learn to connect their desire with danger: as women are required to control the desire of their partners and bear the consequences of sex, they learn to fear their desires and to disconnect them from themselves.

This devaluing of women's desire connects to a limited agency, as described in a study by Bartels (2007), where she found that acceptance of the dominant sex script predicted women's consent to unwanted sex. Miriam (2007) also exposed women's internalization of the devaluing of their own consent in her discussion of Phillips' study of women who did not name coerced sexual episodes as sexual assault. Miriam connects this phenomenon to the "yes means yes, no means no" cultural construction of consent: she criticizes this model of consent as being individualistic and decontextualized. Miriam argues that as the women negotiated their role within the unwanted sex (e.g., performing oral sex to avoid intercourse, faking orgasms to end intercourse as early as possible), their experience did not match the unilateral "no means no" construction of sexual coercion, and thus did not label themselves as victims of sexual assault. Miriam also connected the women's reluctance to label their experiences of unwanted sex as sexual assault to Rich's (1980) idea of the sex-right. Miriam argues that the women Phillips interviewed internalized the idea that men have a right to their bodies, which resulted in the elimination of men's responsibility for the act of unwanted sex and the normalization of the experience of sexual coercion. Thus, they did not label their experiences as sexual assault.

This narrowing of women's agency in sex to being responsible for stopping or controlling the behaviour of men has clear connects to the devaluing of women's consent to sex. This devaluing is evident in the framing and prosecution of sexual assault. MacKinnon (2005) has written extensively regarding how the awareness that "rape is not so much an act of violence or sex as it is an act of sex inequality...is barely traceable in U.S. criminal law" (p. 242), and how

“rape law can be seen to presuppose and enforce inequality between women and men in sex” (p. 242). MacKinnon describes how sexual assault legislation frames sex as a process in which one member is active and the other passive, and thus consent is determined by the absence of a “no” from the passive member. This construction of sexual assault is predicated both on the assumption that sex is something done by one partner to another and that all individuals have equal ability to consent to sex. As both of these premises are not reflective of some women’s experiences of sexual assault, MacKinnon argues that this construction of sexual assault minimizes and obscures women’s experiences of sexual assault. While MacKinnon writes from an American perspective, Canadian sexual assault legislature has similar biases. Morrow and Varcoe (2002) highlight how while many recommendations on institutional changes have been made to reduce violence against women, the Canadian government has enacted very few of them.

This devaluing of women’s consent is also clearly manifested in the rates of sexual assault against woman. As sexual assault is the most under-reported crime (Canadian Federation for Sexual Health [CFSH], 2007), it is difficult to accurately assess the prevalence of sexual violence against women in Canada. Victimization surveys are a commonly used indicator of sexual assault, although the sample used and questions asked produce vastly different results, and Statistics Canada has only conducted one comprehensive study (in 1993) on violence against women in Canada. In a study done in 2001, 19% of women (in comparison to 4% of men) in grades 7, 9, and 11 reported having experienced at least one upsetting incident of sexual coercion, while another study found that 80% of undergraduate women had experienced violence within a dating relationship (cited in CFSH). Multiple marginalization affects experience of sexual violence: for example, women with disabilities (Fitzsimons, 2009), women of colour

(Collins, 2009), trans women (Stotzer, 2009) and women who have sex with women (Lhomond & Saurel-Cubizolles, 2006), as well as women who are members of combinations of these groups, all experience sexual assault at higher rates than able-bodied, White women, and cisgender women, respectively. A study done by Egale Canada (2008) found that 39% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ) students had experienced sexual harassment in their high school, in comparison to 19% of straight and cisgender students.

The connection between the (hetero)sexist definition of sex and sexual violence against lesbians is most clear in the case of “corrective rape” (ActionAid, 2009), a growing concern in South Africa, in which men sexually assault women they presume to be lesbian in order to force “heterosexuality” onto them. Rich (1980) describes the violent infliction of compulsory heterosexuality on women from a broader perspective: she includes the history of institutionalizing women who expressed sexual desire for women, the economic pressures placed on women to stay in heterosexual relationships, and the social ostracism of women who deviate from compulsory heterosexuality as violent enforcement of heterosexuality.

**Simultaneous overvaluing and devaluing of women’s sexuality.** Another effect of the dominant (hetero)sexist construction of sex is the simultaneous overvaluing of women’s sexual attractiveness combined with the denigration of women’s sexual activity. This combination is informed by the gendering of sexual agency and desire, as it constructs women to be sexual objects for men’s consumption. This commodification of women as sexual objects is exemplified in the cultural emphasis placed on women’s virginity. The idea of virginity as a virtue is predicated on the idea that a woman’s greatest asset is both her sexual attractiveness to men and the absence of sexual activity. Emphasis on virginity paradoxically maintains attention on women’s sexuality in its relentless focus on the absence of sexual activity. This maintenance



of the focus on sex under the guise of chastity and propriety is the same process that Foucault (1978) describes in his repression hypothesis: he argues that the “repressive” Victorian era did not reduce discussion of sexuality, but instead created a “discursive explosion” (p. 17), as it greatly increased the cultural focus on sexuality.

Tolman’s (2002) text “Dangers of Desires” clearly documents how a primary intrapsychic effect of the paradox between valuing of women for their sexual attraction and denigrating them for acting out their sexual desires is confusion. One of her participants describes her understanding of sex as:

...so confusing ‘cause ...you have to be the one to say no, but why should you be the one to, ‘cause I mean maybe you’re enjoying it, and shouldn’t have to say no or anything. But if you don’t maybe the guy’ll just keep going and going, and you can’t do that, because then you would be a slut...I mean so many of my friends have done it and in a way it’s kinda good if you, like my friends who haven’t ever kissed a guy or they’ve just kissed or something, that’s not cool either, you have to be kinda in the middle, you know, you have to like know what you’re doing but not go that far. (p. 110)

The overvaluing and devaluing of women’s sexuality intersects with heterosexism to create a situation where women who have sex with women’s sexuality is both emphasized and invisibilized, simultaneously. Rich (1980) describes this as the portrayal of lesbianism on a continuum from deviant to simply invisible. Twenty years later, Ussher (1997) echoes Rich’s sentiment in her argument that lesbians’ sexuality is either portrayed as benign (and thus unimportant to their identity) or rapacious (and thus central to their identity). Central to all of these representations of lesbianism is the lack of acknowledgement of lesbian women’s full humanity. Their sexual desires are either essentialized or invisibilized, both of which obscure the women’s full agency. Gelder and Brandt (1997) notes how the classification of lesbians as either objectified or invisibilized is influenced by class, racial, and age aspects, as representations

of (hetero)sexualized lesbians in popular culture are generally White, young, and very feminine e.g., the “lipstick lesbian”.

Again, nowhere is the objectification of women who have sex with women more evident than in their commodification. Miriam (2007) describes the increasing commodification of lesbian sexual activity, which uses the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) to represent sexual activity between women as something primarily for the pleasure of male viewers, thus constructing the women as sexual objects for men. Jackson (2009) describes how the representation of sexual activity among women is often by women who are understood by the audience to be heterosexual, and who use sexual activity with other women to both titillate male observers (including the audience) and to affirm the heterosexuality of the women involved. Diamond (2005) uses the term “heteroflexible” to describe women who identify as heterosexual but engage in sexual activity with women to appeal to men. Diamond (2005) discusses how the representation of “heteroflexible” women in mainstream media, which appropriates women’s sexuality to titillate male viewers, paradoxically serves to reinforce the heterosexuality of all involved by presenting same-gender sexual activity as “experimentation” (and thus not legitimate), and in reinforces the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy thus invisibilizing bisexuality or sexual fluidity, which serves to obscure societal heterosexism by presenting heterosexuality as a choice equivalent to being QPBL. Together, these dichotomies regarding women’s sexuality (virgin/whore, oversexed/undersexed, heterosexual/homosexual) devalue women’s sexual desires, sexual agency, and sexual identities, while supporting a narrow, damaging, and (hetero)sexist vision of sexuality.

**Culture of silence regarding sex between women.** In the above mentioned article discussing sexual activity between women, Diamond (2005) was almost exclusively focused on

representations of kisses between characters known to the audience to be heterosexual. The portrayal of sex between women, particularly women known to be QPBL, is still rare in mainstream media, as is discussion of how women have sex with women in mainstream media (Diamond), in school based sexual education programs (Eyre, 1997), and between doctors and their patients (McNair, 2005). McNair discusses further how this silence regarding how women have sex with each other affects the knowledge of health care professionals, who often are not taught relevant questions to ask woman patients who have sex with women or about health risks associated with sex between women, thus resulting in inefficient care, as well as negative and adverse health effects for their patients. Gordon (2006) also discusses how silence regarding sexuality between women creates confusion for lesbian women themselves, who reported being confused of the “rules” for sexual relationships between women.

### **Agency**

Together, the (hetero)sexist effects of the (hetero)sexist construction of the dominant cultural sex script creates a bleak portrayal of women, particularly QPBL women, as oppressed victims. However, recognizing that agency and oppression can coexist is crucial to representing the complexity of the experiences of women who have sex with women. While there are clear (hetero)sexist effects of the dominant construction of sexuality, this does not mean that women have no role in their creation of their individual understandings of sex. Some (e.g., Grost, 1994) have argued that Rich’s (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality obscures that role that women play in creating and supporting the (hetero)sexist understanding of sex, while others argue that Rich’s theory devalues women’s capabilities of making decisions and forming their own understandings of sex.

This seeming paradox between recognition of agency and recognition of structural constraints is well addressed within Foucault's (1991) discussion of 'governmentality'. Foucault describes how individuals within a society can never be either fully free of that society's discourse or fully controlled by the government, and this struggle between 'being governed' and 'being free' is where 'subjectivity' is formed (Lupton, 1995). Foucault describes the process of 'subjectification', where individuals accept and internalize dominant norms, and then regulate their own behaviours to conform to the norm. He argues, however, that power is not only a negative prohibition, but also a positive production (1983), and (famously) that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1978, p. 95). Thus, while all subjects in a given system have (varying degrees of) agency, this agency is constitutive of and inherently bound to the system of power. This system of power is what informs the understanding of the actor- while it can be resisted, it always informs the resistance.

The concept of constrained agency is also discussed by Miriam (2007) in her description of women's agency as "the ability to negotiate the terms of a situation they take to be inevitable, namely, a situation defined by men's implicit right to have sexual access to them" (p. 224). This conceptualization of agency as the ability to play within a given, constricted, system highlights the problem of conflating oppression with the absence of freedom, and dichotomizing oppression as something an individual either has or does not have. This conflation and dichotomization creates an image of individuals as either completely passive or completely free. Foucault (1994) argues that complete emancipation is not possible: some form of government will always exist, and thus analysis should focus on whether systems of government leave room for individuals to change the system. Foucault further argues that systems of government become impossible to

change when they are presented as moral, religious, or biological imperatives, and thus are made intangible. The system of government that reinforces the oppression of women in general, and QPBL women in particular, can be seen to have been made almost intangible through all three modes, thus rendering it difficult to change the system.

### **Sex Between Women**

The agency of women who have sex with women in constructing their own understanding of sex and sexuality has been the subject of much scrutiny within feminist theory. Analysis and theorizing of the sexuality of lesbian women in particular was one of the controversies of the second wave feminist “sex wars”. Gordon (2006) provides a succinct overview of the conflict over conceptualizations of the sexuality of primarily lesbian women. Gordon describes how many second wave feminists (including Daly, 1978; Dworkin, 1981; and Rich, 1980) framed sexual relationships with men as part of the system of male dominance, and that masculinized sexuality should be shunned, and feminized sexuality (particularly valuing emotional connection over sexual experiences) should be prized. Gordon then describes how this “de-sexed” version of sex between women was challenged by “sex radical” or “sex positive” feminists (including Califia, 1980; Hollibaugh, 1989; and Vance, 1989), who argued that the restrictive prescriptions imposed on women’s sexuality by the previously mentioned radical feminists were also harmful to women, and that true liberation lay in free expression of sexual desires. Gordon then discusses how the idea of a pre-existing sexuality needing liberation from a repressive culture, inherent to both these models of sexuality, was later rejected by post-structural (e.g., Foucault, 1978; Tiefer, 1995) and sex script (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1973) approaches to sexuality.

Other, more recent researchers focusing on the sexuality and experiences of women who have sex with women include: Gordon (2006), who discussed contradictions in lesbian women's resistance to sexist stereotypes regarding physical appearance but apparent acceptance of sexist ideas regarding sexuality; Bolso (2008) who examined power relations in lesbian relationships, arguing that these power relationships are both part of heteronormative society and are subversive to this society; Ussher (2005) who has discussed differences in desire between heterosexual and lesbian women, including (hetero)sexism as a barrier to lesbian women's ability to recognize their feelings as desires and reflecting on how meanings ascribed to heterosexual women's sexual desire (e.g., danger) create a complicated situation for lesbian women that isn't wholly negative; Iasenza (2002, 2008) who has criticized social constructivist ideas in conceptualizations of lesbian sexuality through her dismantling of the "lesbian bed death" myth, arguing for an ecological analysis of lesbian women and for the need to understand the influence of sexual orientation as well as gender as organizing factors for lesbian women's sexualities; and Kitzinger (2004) who was ahead of her time with the text "The Social Construction of Lesbianism", where she argues against liberal framings of lesbianism, where lesbianism is portrayed as a choice that is equivalent to heterosexuality and lesbian women are analyzed through extant psychological frameworks (which were blind to the operation of (hetero)sexism within their lives), depoliticized the identities of lesbian women and invisibilized the effects of power inequalities on their experiences.

To understand theories regarding the dynamics or differences of sex between women, it is first necessary to have an image of what sex between women tends to look like (or what elements tend to make up interpersonal sex scripts for women who have sex with women). McNair (2005) provides this image in a summary of studies done by Diamant, Lever, and

Schuster (2000), Lemp et al. (1995), and Diamant, Schuster, McGuigan, and Lever (1999) of American and Australian women who have sex with women. McNair found these rates of engagement in sexual activity between women: oral-genital contact (up to 98% of women), manual stimulation of genitals including vaginal penetration with fingers (up to 98% of women), whole-body stimulation (including hugging, kissing, licking, sucking, and tribadism<sup>3</sup>; 85% of women), vaginal use of sex toys (up to 69% of women), anal penetration with fingers (up to 64% of women), oral-anal contact (33% of women), vaginal fisting (25% of women), and BDSM<sup>4</sup> activities (15% of women).

While McNair reviewed studies beyond those limited to lesbian women, the inclusion of other sexual identities than lesbian is uncommon among examinations of sex between women. The following studies found differences associated with lesbian sex in comparison to heterosexual sex: while this cannot represent the experiences of all women who have sex with women, it can help to inform their experiences of sex. Women who have sex with women have unique challenges due to heteronormativity: there is evidence to suggest that these challenges are related to the construction of a different understanding of sexuality than heterosexual women who have sex with men. Iasenza's (2002) review of lesbian sexuality highlighted studies that found lesbian women to be more sexually arousable, more sexually assertive, and to report higher levels of satisfaction with their sexual lives than heterosexual women (Iasenza, 1991 cited in Iasenza, 2002). Masters and Johnson's (1979) study of homosexuality also found lesbian couples to be less genital- and orgasm focused than heterosexual couples. Further, both Bolso (2008) and Gordon (2006) found an important dynamic of lesbian sex to be the focus on equality of pleasure and of desire. In her study of lesbian and heterosexual girls, Ussher (2005) found that while heterosexual girls were concerned with the need to obscure their desire for sexual

activity, the lesbian girls were not. One of her participants stated “I feel I can take the initiative, and be dominant, and be active, whereas in straight relationships I’ve had, ah, I never felt that was allowed, or was okay, or I would be seen as masculine if I did.” (p. 29). Ussher interprets these positive aspects of lesbian sexuality as originating from their “freed[om] from the constraints of the heterosexual matrix” (p. 27).

### **Perspectives from the Margins**

The idea of marginalization of lesbian and gay sexuality as having positive aspects is echoed by Dag Strang Nielsen in his statement that:

I used to believe that some of the point of being a homosexual was to undermine power, to alarm, to challenge and to revolt. . . . I for one feel more comfortable on the fringe, on the periphery and in perversion, and I choose to fight for a space on the margin, in infectiousness, in absence, in the thoughts of an end—as a weed, as a heretic. (cited in Bolso, 2008, p. 62, Bolso’s translation).

This idea that marginality implies resistance clearly echoes Foucault’s (1978) statement that “where there is power, there is resistance” (p. 95).

Feminist standpoint theory is predicated on the belief that location within society informs the assumptions and beliefs we have about society. Haraway (1988) used the term “double vision” to refer to the knowledge that marginalized individuals have of both the dominant culture and of the marginal culture, and highlighted how this perspective facilitates critique of the dominant culture. This implies that women who have sex with women would be better positioned to critique the (hetero)sexism of the dominant construction of sex. This valuing of the ideas of individuals who are marginalized for the creating of social change is also discussed in theories regarding third space. Third space, an idea within critical postcolonial and race theories (Bhabha, 1994), refers to cultures created between dominant cultures, emphasizing the hybridity of these cultures as well as their under-recognized nature. Third space was applied by Li (2009)



beyond critical race theory to describe the activism of a particular group of people with AIDS enacting the GIPA (Greater Involvement of People with AIDS) Principle. He defined third space in this context as “the dynamic space between the centre and the margins where the historically oppressed or socially excluded communities dialogue, interact and develop new thinking, hybrid cultures and innovative practices that challenge the status quo and the dominant discourse.” This conceptualization of third space as a place where ideas regarding marginalized experiences can be developed, brought into dialogue with dominant ideas, and used to change these ideas has clear relevance for sexuality.

The importance of exploring the experiences of people who have been marginalized in order to change the dominant culture is highlighted by Freire (1970), who stated:

The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both (p. 44).

While his dichotomization of oppressor/oppressed and his placement of the responsibility for change onto the oppressed are both problematic, Freire highlights that the experiences of marginalized individuals need to be valued and made central in order to create social change. Thus, in order to understand how change to the dominant sex script is even possible, the experiences of sex of marginalized people must be understood and valued.

### **Research Goal, Objectives, and Questions**

The goal of this research is to broaden scholarly knowledge regarding the experiences of women who have sex with women. Given the (hetero)sexism of the dominant definition and script of sex and the cultural silence regarding how women have sex with women, this research will focus on the exclusion of women who have sex with women from the dominant sex script.

There are four main objectives of this research. The first is to better understand how this exclusion affects the development of an understanding of sex by women who have sex with women, as well as to understand how cultural representations of sex, cultural messages about pleasure, sexual health education, accessibility of resources, and sexual experiences affect their understandings of sex, and how these understandings change over time. Another objective of this research is to better understand how this exclusion shapes their expectations regarding sex and how their experiences of sex differ from (or match) these expectations, focusing on first experiences of sex and discussion of unique elements of sex between women. A third objective is to understand further the recognition of sexual desire and the development of sexual identity in the lives of women who have sex with women. The last objective is to explore whether this exclusion results in these women seeing sex between women and their sexual identities as forms of resistance.

The research questions for this study are:

1. What are important factors in the development of understandings of sex for women who have sex with women?
2. What are women who have sex with women's expectations regarding sex with women, and how does that differ from their actual experiences of sex?
3. How do women who have sex with women negotiate their sexual desires and their sexual identities?
4. Do women who have sex with women perceive their experiences of sex and/or their sexual identity as a way to resist dominant heterosexist norms?

### **Importance of Research**

This study's approach to sexuality research is important in answering the many calls for a transformation of the dominant understanding of sexuality (e.g., Bolso, 2008; Hite, 1976; Hite, 2008; Iasenza, 2008; Koedt, 1996; Rich, 1980) by using a broader understanding of sex and by including analysis of the benefits gleaned from being excluded from the dominant construction of sex. This research helps to fill many gaps. First, there has been an absence of focus on strength within studies of LGTBQ communities in Community Psychology research (Harper & Schneider, 2003). Of the strengths-based research regarding lesbian communities, most have emphasized the similarities between lesbian women and straight women (Kitzinger, 2004). This assimilative approach, where similarities are emphasized and differences, particularly in power, are often not analyzed, while beneficial for human rights activism (such as same-sex marriage rights or the right to adopt children), frequently depoliticizes the identities of LGTBQ individuals, essentializes sexuality, and represents sexuality as an intra-individual quality that is unconnected to social structure (Kitzinger). Similarly, research regarding lesbian sex often highlights the similarities between lesbian and heterosexual sex (e.g., Rothblum, 2000; Matthews, Hughes, & Tartaro, 2007). The present study includes analysis of the potential benefits of sex outside heteronormative standards, thus highlighting the importance of challenging dominant ideas regarding sex, rather than assimilating non-heteronormative understandings of sex. The inclusion of the positive aspects of resisting the heteronormative framework is similar to the analysis of queer sexual identity within queer theory: however, as there has been little work within queer theory regarding the construction and meaning of sexual acts themselves, the present work complements queer theorists' analysis of sexuality.

The absence of study of the meaning of sexual activity is particularly notable for women, both in queer theory-based research and in critical/Community Psychology research (Harper &

Schneider, 2003; Ussher, 2000). Within Community Psychology, there has been little research of individuals who are LGBTQ or of LGBTQ communities: Harper and Schneider highlight the past and continued under-representation of analysis of LGBTQ issues in Community Psychology journals. Further, most research regarding LGBTQ people is focused on non-heterosexual cisgendered men (Harper & Schneider, 2003), and very little research focuses on non-heterosexual women (Bond, Hill, Mulvey, & Terenzio, 2000). Finally, this research seeks to answer the calls (Bond et al., 2000; Mulvey, 1988) for a greater incorporation of feminist perspectives within Community Psychology.

In his landmark essay on 'psychopolitical validity', Prilleltensky (2008) argued the need for merging individual-level psychological with macro-level political analyses in the work of Community Psychology in order to create lasting social change. In examining one of the most personal phenomena (the act of sex) from a macro-level perspective, this research attempts to answer Prilleltensky's call, and work towards changing dominant beliefs.

## **Methodology**

### **Paradigm**

My research is mainly situated within the critical research paradigm, with some constructivist influences. Central to my theoretical approach is the critical realist assumption that the construction and definition of reality is mediated by power, and that the dominant construction of reality has significant impact on the lives of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). My thesis assumes the construction of sex to be directed by (hetero)sexism of societal and institutional structures and to thus have (hetero)sexist effects. I incorporate some constructivist influences in the recognition and valuing of the multiplicity of people's constructions of sex. However, I reject the neutrality that stems from the relativism of

constructivism, as I assume that power inequalities affect the legitimacy given to different constructions of sex, that the dominant cultural representation of sex has a much stronger effect on people's experiences, and that all constructions of sex are built within the framework of the dominant culture. A major component of my work is the deconstruction of the naturalization of heterosexual sex, and the reconstruction of sex that reflects the experiences and desires of women who have had sex with women.

Critical research is predicated on the need to use research to create social change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). To work towards this goal, my research is based on anti-oppressive and emancipatory values, which include examining power differences affecting the lives of participants, being reflexive of power differences between myself and participants, criticizing the negative impacts of dominant ideas of gender and sexuality, and calling for change to oppressive systems. Through the use of these values, I seek to amplify the voice of a marginalized and often invisible group, and aim to work towards the elimination of (hetero)sexism.

As my research is primarily focused on the examination of the (hetero)sexist effects of patriarchy on the construction of sexuality, my research is mainly informed by feminist approaches to critical theory. I am also incorporating queer critical theory, which challenges dichotomous constructions of gender and rejects the idea of certain sexual orientations being natural (Plummer, 2005) in my deconstruction of gendered sex roles and the (hetero)sexist definition of sex; however, I do not consider the research to be fully within the queer critical paradigm as the deconstruction of gender itself is not a goal of my research.

### **Standpoint**

Within qualitative research, the researcher plays the role of instrument, interpreting and sculpting the experiences and ideas shared by participants to create a cohesive theory (Marshall,

2006). As the researcher's identity and experiences will inform how they will interpret their participants' experiences, it is important to incorporate 'reflexivity' regarding how the researcher's values, experiences, and identity affect the entire research process.

This research speaks primarily from my own standpoint, and from my interpretations of the interviews with participants. All aspects of my values, experiences, and identity have affected how I approached and conducted my research. Many parts of my identity fit the dominant cultural norm of sexuality, including being White, young, western, upper middle class, cissexual, and able-bodied. This matching between these parts of my identity and the dominant narrative of sexuality obscures my ability to see its oppressive nature, and reinforces its naturalness to me. Thus, while I am not focusing on the racist, ageist, western-centric, classist, cisnormative, or ableist dimensions of the construction of sexuality, given my relative privilege in these areas, I am more susceptible to these biases. I have thus tried to maintain consciousness of them and aimed to account for them within my analyses.

The parts of my identity that do not fit as well with the dominant construction of sexuality, namely my identity as a queer feminist woman, have strongly influenced my approach to this research. My belief that the dominant understanding of sex is sex-negative, hetero-, male-, and phallo-centric, and harmful to all individuals drives me to conduct research to expose the biases within our construction of sex, and to strive towards change. My research is further driven by my personal experiences as an individual trying to explore my own sexuality within this sex-negative, (hetero)sexist climate. My rejection of a heterosexual sexual identity also affects my approach to this research: my experience with the invisibilization that occurs through the normalization of heterosexuality drives my desire to change the dominant understanding of sex. However, this invisibilization also has positive ramifications, as I have never been harassed

or discriminated against on the basis of my sexual identity. As the effects of research on queer sexuality have the potential to have larger ramifications on the lives of individuals who are more visibly queer than on my life, I must be reflexive of the potential effects of my research on the daily lives of my participants, and must ensure that my research accurately reflects their experiences.

### **Method**

This research study followed an analytic induction framework, a qualitative approach where researchers have hypotheses prior to data collection, and revise these hypotheses over the course of data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, I explored the topic of women's experiences of sex with women through qualitative interviews conducted with 11 women. Interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix A for the interview guide), and focused on four content domains: development of an understanding of sex, expectations and experiences of sex, desire sexual identity, and resistance. In the first section, questions asked to participants included how they came to their current understanding of sex, what their earliest understanding of sex was, and whether there is enough discussion about how women have sex with women. Questions asked in the second section included describing their first sex with a woman, how it was different than they expected, and whether there were differences in significance between first sex with women versus men. In the third section, questions included whether they felt represented in sexual health education, why they identify their sexuality in the manner they do, and whether their sexual identity is an important aspect of their identity. In the fourth category, questions included whether they saw sex between women as a form of resistance and whether they see their sexual identity as a form of resistance.

All interviews were conducted by the investigator in a private office at Planned Parenthood Toronto or at the University of Toronto's downtown campus. These settings were chosen as they were accessible via public transportation, and as they were private, in order to protect participant's confidentiality. Planned Parenthood Toronto's offices were chosen due to its familiarity for participants who had been part of the Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia (TEACH) group, a peer-to-peer education program coordinated by Planned Parenthood Toronto, which was one of the programs used to recruit participants. Before beginning the interview, participants were explained the purpose of the research, its benefits and risks, and were asked to complete an informed consent statement and a demographic form (see appendix B and C for forms). Participants were advised that they could decline to answer any questions, and could end the interview at any point, and not suffer any negative consequences. Participants were then given their 10\$ honoraria, and asked if they had any questions before the interview began. All participants signed the consent form; no participants declined to answer questions or ended the interview early. Interviews were approximately 1 hour in length; the shortest was 30 minutes, while the longest was 98 minutes.

Following data analysis, all participants were invited to a discussion session where they were asked to provide feedback to an overview of the study done by the researcher, which reviewed the findings and analysis of the study. Seven participants indicated their interest in participating in the session; due to difficulties in coordination, only two participants were able to attend the session. A similar consent process to the interviews was followed (see appendix E for consent form). This session was audio recorded and the feedback was summarized.

**Sampling.** To qualify for participation in this study, participants were required to be woman-identified (cis or transgender), have had sex with women, be of age 18-30, and live in the



Greater Toronto Area. These inclusion requirements were made clear to prospective participants in all communications regarding the study; in recognition that the categories of “woman-identified” and “have had sex with women” do not have clear boundaries, the judgment of whether an individual sufficiently fit the inclusion requirements was left up to prospective participants. Sampling was done in Toronto rather than Waterloo as the population of women who have sex with women was assumed to be larger and more diverse in Toronto. Further, as Toronto has more programs that work with QPBL women, the population was more accessible to the investigator. One participant lived in Waterloo.

As identification as a lesbian, bisexual, or queer woman does not completely overlap with sexual experience with women (Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1995; Rothblum, 2000), participation in the study was restricted to women who have had sex with women, rather than women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer. While a diversity of sexual identities was sought (including women who are straight-identified and women who do not identify their sexuality), and participants were told that I was interested in talking to all women who have had sex with women regardless of their sexual orientation, queer identified women were over-represented in the sample, as they are more likely to be part of and connected to the queer community and to programs I used in my recruitment. In an attempt to include the voices of women who might not otherwise be heard, I purposely sought out women with a diversity of ethno-racial identities and socioeconomic statuses; however, given the small sample size, participants did not fully reflect the diversity of women within Toronto who have sex with women.

Recruitment was done through the use of purposive as well as snowball sampling. Research began with recruitment of members of the TEACH program; the coordinator of this program sent an email (see appendix D) describing the study to current and past participants of

the program, who were advised to email the investigator if interested. Participants who were interested were asked to recommend the study to other individuals they knew who may be interested in the study. The TEACH program was selected as the first step of the recruitment process because the members of the TEACH program are primarily young queer women of diverse ethno-racial identities. The coordinators of the newcomer and immigrant queer youth group and the trans youth group at the Sherbourne Health Centre, a health centre in downtown Toronto that includes many programs for LGBTQ people, were also contacted to recruit participants. Their coordinators sent the same email to their participants; however, none of their participants contacted the investigator.

**Analysis.** The interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder, transcribed, and coded using N-Vivo. Data were coded using an initial coding framework developed from literature, field notes, and personal knowledge. The analysis of literature previously discussed primarily informed the parent nodes used in the initial coding framework. These parent nodes were ‘use of sex scripts’, ‘sex as a constructed act’, ‘importance of agency’, ‘(hetero)sexist effects of scripts’, ‘experiences of sex’, and ‘sex/identity as resistance’. Child nodes were developed from the same literature and from field notes during interviews of findings that were surprising, different than what was expected, or were not intuitive. During the initial round of coding, data were also coded into new child themes that were not part of the initial coding framework when the data were relevant to the research questions but did not fit in an extant theme. Following the initial round of coding, the coding framework was modified to better reflect the responses of participants. Parent nodes were streamlined into nodes that better matched the research questions. A second round of coding was then done to further analyze

codes containing many citations, further splitting these themes into new grandchild and great-grandchild themes, and to ensure that all coding matched the updated framework.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness of Data**

The use of analytic induction methods and a members' check in combination with ongoing research reflexivity supports the validity of this research (Patton, 2002; Mertens, 2009). The use of an audit trail (notes kept throughout the research process documenting details of the data analysis, particularly changes to the thematic framework) by the researcher throughout the analysis process further supports the validity of the research (Bowen, 2009).

### **Dissemination Strategy**

Initial research results were shared with interested participants through a member check session, which also ensured that the results accurately reflected their experiences. Once their feedback had been incorporated, the research was made into a report that will be sent to participants who indicated their interest on their consent forms. The TEACH program coordinator was also provided with a research summary that is youth-friendly and accessible. Research results will also be published in academic journals.

### **Ethics**

There were two main ethical considerations at the individual level for this research study: psychological distress and stigmatization for participation in the study. The first ethical concern is the potential psychological distress that can come from discussing sexuality. Since experience of sexual assault is quite common among women (CFSH, 2007), it is possible that several of my research participants have experienced sexual assault; as such, discussion of sexual experiences may have reminded participants of their experience of sexual assault, thus causing psychological distress. Furthermore, discussion of identification with marginalized sexualities can also be

distressing. To minimize both these risks, I was clear in my recruitment that the interview would involve discussion of sex and sexuality, and would include information for crisis counseling centres and phone lines in my consent forms. While participants identified as QPBL, I framed my questions regarding sexual identity to be flexible, and open to whatever identification the participants were comfortable with in order to fully incorporate the experiences of those who were in the process of determining their sexual identity and/or who did not feel that their sexual identity fit into any one category. The second main ethical consideration at the individual level was the potential stigmatization accompanying participation in the study. As sexual experience was an inclusion criterion for my study, and I incorporated a snowball sampling approach in my recruitment process, there was potential for the privacy of my participants to be compromised. To minimize this threat, I ensured confidentiality of participation in my study, and recruited in a manner such that individuals' interest in participation was communicated privately.

At a community level, the main ethical considerations for this research study are the potential for my research to be depoliticizing, to be reductionist, and to continue the hyper-sexualization of lesbian women. A potential threat to the catalytic authenticity, the ability of the study to promote action (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), is the potential depoliticizing nature of the use of a strengths-based approach to research with a marginalized group. Strengths-focused research risks obscuring the influence and experience of oppression within the queer community, and decreases the urgency of creating change to the marginalization of non-heterosexual sex from the dominant sex script. To minimize this threat to the catalytic validity of my study, I used an anti-oppressive approach in my research in order to highlight the negative impacts of the dominant construction of sexuality, and underscore the need for this construction to change. Furthermore, I frame the strengths of women who have sex with women as evidence that the uncritical

assimilation of queer sexuality into the mainstream construction of sex is harmful, and thus the mainstream construction of sex itself should be reframed to reflect the experiences of women who have sex with women. The second ethical risk at the community level is the risk that this research will reduce the sexuality and sexual experiences of women to the act of sex, thus obscuring the importance of meaning, context, and sexual identity. This risk primarily stems from the sexological focus of my work, which complements the extensive research regarding sexual identity within queer theory. To minimize this risk, I was conscious of and valued analysis of context, meaning, and identity while maintaining focus on the act of sex, and I connect my work to the extant body of work regarding sexual identity. The risk of essentializing women's experiences is connected to the third ethical risk at the community level, which is the threat of supporting the hyper-sexualization of lesbian women (which can be expanded to all women who have sex with women). Ussher (1997) has argued that representations of lesbian women either over-value or under-value their sexual activity, both of which continue to reduce lesbian women to their sexual behaviour. To minimize this risk, the reasons for which I choose to focus on sexual behaviour was made clear, and care was taken in reflecting the nuance and complexities of the experiences of women who have sex with women.

### **Demographics**

I interviewed 11 people. All 11 identified as female: one participant identified as having a fluid gender on the demographic form, and another participant stated that they did not identify as a woman during the interview; neither of these participants identified themselves as transgender on the demographic form. The average age of the participants was 24.5; ages ranged from 18-30, with 24 being the most common age. All participants were born in Canada. Five had university degrees, two had post-graduate degrees, one had completed high school, one had

some high school, one had some university, and one had some post-graduate school. The two individuals who had some high school/ completed high school were both under 22 years of age.

For the racial background and sexual identity sections of the demographic form, participants were able to select multiple identity categories, thus there are more than 11 identifications included. In the racial background section, seven participants identified as White-Canadian, three as White-European, one as East Asian, one as Latin American, and one as Eastern European Jew. On the demographic form, six participants identified as queer, three as pansexual, three as lesbian, one as bisexual, and one as gay. Participants were also asked their sexual identity within the interview: the two participants who had multiple identifications on their demographic forms (lesbian, gay, and queer; lesbian and queer) only gave one identity in the interview (queer). One participant gave an additional identification within the interview (adding lesbian to her pansexual identification). I use the identification participants gave within the interview throughout the results.

## **Results**

The themes from the interviews are organized in four sections: developing an understanding of sex, experiences of sex, desire and sexual identity, and resistance. The first section focuses on how participants came to have their current understanding/definition of sex, including their experiences with cultural silence regarding how women have sex with each other, how their definitions of sex have changed over time, and their negotiation of (hetero)sexism in learning about sex. The second section focuses on participants' sexual experiences, concentrating on their first experience of sex with women and unique elements of sex between women. The third section focuses on participants' negotiation of desire and sexual identification. The fourth section focuses on their conceptions of their sexual identifications and

sex between women as resistance. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms; dashes within quotes indicate pauses in speech.

### **Section 1: Developing an Understanding of Sex**

This section focuses on the changes to participants' understandings of sex, examining participants' negotiation of the cultural silence regarding how women have sex with each other, their negotiation of their definitions of sex, and their negotiation of the hetero(sexism) of culture in developing their understandings of sex.

**Negotiation of silence.** All participants agreed that there was not enough discussion within mainstream media of how women have sex with each other, which I'm conceptualizing as a "culture of silence" regarding how women have sex with women. Participants discussed both the process of developing their understanding of sex within this silence, as well as benefits and drawbacks to this silence.

*Most of the time I didn't know what I was doing: The process of developing understanding.* Given the absence of mainstream representation of sex between women, participants were asked how they developed their understanding of how to have sex with women. Many women discussed learning about sex from their partners; many had early partners who had more sexual experience with women than they did. One participant describes by saying:

Most of the time I didn't know what I was doing. I mean, I dated women who had more experience than I did, so- like, I had them teaching me basically I just had to go off of what I experienced with the women I dated. And I didn't really have a whole lot else to go on.  
(Ava)

Several participants discussed talking about sex with other QPLB friends; one participant discussed the importance of learning with her friends about sex, saying:

I guess I had a really great group of queer friends who would talk about their sexual experiences, or their positions that they tried, so I guess just talking again, just community,

talking about it with friends and having that group of friends who you can actually talk to about that kind of stuff. (Jody)

Many women discussed seeking out representation of sex between women, one of whom said: “I also remember, thinking of the whole research thing, quite soon after I came out- watching like every lesbian movie, or gay movie I could get my hands on” (Lily). This process of seeking representation of sex between women was often part of a broader search for representation of LGBTQ culture in general.

Some participants primarily discussed how the cultural silence meant that they did not know what to do during sex. For some participants, this was liberating and exciting: one participant stated “I think that there's more room for exploring, more room for what I feel is okay, instead of people saying ‘This is how you have sex’” (Taylor). For other participants, this absence of knowledge was a source of anger, frustration, and anxiety: a participant describes this by saying “I do remember feeling frustrated, or feeling nervous and anxious, not really knowing what I was doing. And not really having anyone else to talk to about my experiences, or to validate them” (Brianna). These two positions were not incommensurable: one participant combined them in saying:

I had a lot of insecurity over whether or not I was doing things right. I never had that insecurity when I was having hetero sex, it was just you know, you do this, and that's just what you do. In some senses it's liberating, in that I had the space to define what I want to do, but in a lot of sense it is quite frightening, it makes me quite angry. (Dani)

***Benefits/drawbacks to cultural silence.*** Participants were asked if they thought there were any benefits to this silence: some participants who described positive elements to the development of their understanding of sex within the cultural silence could not identify any benefits to that silence. The idea of there being any benefits to the silence was explicitly rejected by some of the participants who identified positive elements to their development of their



understanding of sex within the cultural silence. Several participants said that while some elements of their process of learning could be seen as positive, they believed the drawbacks to significantly outweigh these positive elements. One participant echoed several others' desire for more representation of sex between women in mainstream culture in saying "So maybe there are some benefits, but I would say that on the whole I'd rather see- I would give up those benefits for better representation, for a greater number of, you know, images, and better quality representations" (Bailey).

Many women described drawbacks to the cultural silence, the most common being the guilt, anxiety, and self-loathing involved in learning how to have sex with women in a (hetero)sexist culture. One participant described this by saying:

It definitely made me feel guilty about that sort of thing when I was much younger... And I just felt so guilty about it, I honestly thought for the longest time that I was doing something horribly, horribly wrong because I didn't know what it was, and I didn't know that it was totally fine, perfectly normal. (Brooke)

Participants also discussed how this cultural silence created a lack of knowledge regarding sex, particularly safer sex between women. In discussing her absence of knowledge of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and safer sex between women, one participant said: "I feel like I made a lot of bad choices because I didn't know what else was out there, I didn't know what my options were. I contracted an STI from the first woman I ever had sex with" (Dani). Some participants also discussed the drawbacks of this silence for the heterosexual community, discussing how many straight people do not have a clear idea of how women have sex with women. Some participants, including Cynthia, combined this with the observation that sex between men has a clearer script:

Well it's usually the question most guys ask me. And I usually say- uh, what do you think we do? Like, guys it's pretty, everyone knows what guys do, but girls

it's just like- what do you think we do, play a puppet show underneath the bed or something?

While fewer in number, there were some benefits to the cultural silence that were also identified by participants; the increased freedom to define sex for themselves was the most common benefit discussed. One participant describes this by saying: "I definitely think it's more freeing. There's less- boxes that I have to fit in, or roles that I have to play, there's not as much of a script as to what should happen, and what shouldn't happen" (Jody). Another describes this freedom in saying:

The idea of two women having sex is so obscure and abstract outside of the community between queer women that I almost think that it's like- well, if there's nothing out there, then we've got to make it up then. We don't have to be content with this thing that's put upon us, because there is no thing that's put upon us, that we get a - we get to be in power of constructing that....when there is this normative structure outside of you, you're faced with, then you cleave to the normative structure, because otherwise you're not normal, right? But with queer women, it's like 'I'm not normal anyway!' (Bailey)

A few participants also discussed the secrecy and excitement to developing their understanding of sex, saying "It was exciting. Because it was like this whole new world that only I knew about, and it was exciting and it was interesting, and it felt fantastic too" (Brooke).

**Negotiation of definition of sex.** Throughout the interviews, participants used their own definitions to discuss sex. All but one had fundamentally changed their definition of sex over their life. In this section, participants discussed why their definitions of sex changed, aspects of those changes, and their current definitions of sex.

*I just had to expand: Why their definition changed.* Participants were asked about their current definition of sex and how they had come to this definition; almost all had made significant changes to their definitions. Many described their definition of sex changing after

their first experiences of sex with women. One participant described this process of change to her definition by saying:

Some big factors would have been when I started having sex, actually engaging in sex, I start to construct in my mind, like 'Oh! This feels good, or this doesn't feel good' things like that. And pretty much if you're in the category of 'This feels good', you're in the category of sort of sexual category. (Bailey)

The participants' need to change their definitions of sex following their first time having sex with a woman was often linked to the absence of kinds of sexual activity they were commonly engaging in during sex with women from their definitions of sex. One woman makes this clear in saying "And I just, I had to expand. I basically had to expand my ideas of what sex was- otherwise, most of the time I wasn't having sex with a woman" (Brianna). The case of women who had only ever had sex with women was also discussed by several participants as a key element to their change in definition; one stated:

And then I started getting with women, and I knew people who only had been with people, and I was like- well you're not a virgin, though you've only been with a woman... And I guess my thought just changed- I'm like, well, they've only been with women, they're sleeping with women, they're not a virgin. (Cynthia)

Many participants also discussed periods of intense self-reflection, often regarding their experiences of sex with women, as an important element to their change in definition. Many participants described this sentiment: "I'm sure that I went through that process of thinking like- well, is that sex? ... It definitely was probably like a lengthy process and a lot of internal turmoil and debate" (Lily).

*Well, am I having sex? Aspects of change to definition.* All the participants whose definitions of sex changed described how it had to change as their previous ones centered on penises and/or penile-vaginal intercourse, which did not encompass all/any of the sex they began having. One participant expresses the reason for change to her definition as being: "From the

experiences, and just not being so narrow minded about it, you know. If you're, if there's no penis involved, if that's your only definition of sex, then you're never having sex if you're having sex with women” (Brianna). Another participant described this process in saying:

First of all realizing that the standard definition of sex doesn't apply to me, because when you think about sex as it's described in most places, it's intercourse, right? And- well, intercourse as far as natural penises go, I don't do that, so it's not applicable at all, so then I kind of had to sit down and think, well am I having sex? (Dani)

Many participants described that in changing their definition of sex they initially took their definition of sex with men and used that to inform their definition of sex with women. This change was described by Lily as a process of broadening; she used a metaphor of a zoo with a limited number of animals to be her definition of sex with men, and a zoo with those same animals in addition to many more to be her new definition of sex, which included sex with men and sex with women. Another described this change as a process of narrowing and then broadening in saying:

I guess I basically took everything I did with men, and removed the penis out of the equation, and that was lesbian sex. That was the formula. So you know, when you're with men, there's oral sex and intercourse. Take away the intercourse, and there you go. That's your definition, that's what you have to work with, and I just sort of thought that it's a matter of taking something away. And I guess as I matured, that's sort of, I've sort of started adding things in, and it's also for me it's expanded from ‘I have to have lesbian sex’ to ‘Queer sex is okay’. So I started this lesbian sex idea, and then it moved into a broader sort of queer space. (Dani)

While some participants described events that suddenly changed how they defined sex, several participants also described how this change to their definition was a gradual process.

*It felt good, it's sex: Current definition of sex.* Most participants did not have a rigid definition of sex. The most common element to participants' current definition of sex was the significant breadth of their definitions. One participant described this in saying “my interpretations are very broad... There's no necessity of a certain number of people, or

penetration, or certain acts, or whatever” (Maya). Beyond simply having broad definitions for sex, several participants also explicitly rejected the idea of having strict parameters to define sex.

One said:

I tried for a long time to find a cut and dried ‘This is sex, and this is not’, but there were just so many situations where I’m like ‘Well was that sex, or wasn’t it?’ .... So I kind of just came to a point where I said ‘It doesn’t matter, it felt good, people liked it, it’s sex! Yay!’ (Dani)

The lack of value placed on firm definitions of sex was also discussed by Cynthia, in her discussion of the inclusion of oral sex in her definition of sex:

It may not be everyone else’s definition. But I call that- what else is it? I don’t know. What would you call it then? Fooling around? It’s way more than that. I don’t know. It’s an argument that’s not worth having, I don’t know, myself, right now. I think it’s all sex. It’s just simpler, it’s more broad.

Other participants were unable to clearly define sex:

How do I explain what sex is? I don’t think it’s just -- sometimes I can do this, sometimes I can’t- I find it’s tough. I don’t just- it’s not all about having orgasms or getting off or- I think it’s very individual, and it depends on the people involved. And I don’t think you have to be necessarily -- it’s about the connection, and exploring each other’s bodies, and --yeah. I don’t know. I don’t know how to explain it. What was the question again? (Jody)

Of participants who had definitions for sex, some defined it based on intimacy between people, while others focused on the experience of sexual pleasure. One participant had very clear parameters to her definition: she defined sex as any act that could involve the use of latex as a barrier (whether in the form of condom, dental dam, or gloves). Another participant also had very clear parameters, defining sex as any actions that are intended to cause orgasm, regardless of whether they do indeed cause orgasm.

Some women discussed having different definitions of sex depending on the gender of those involved (e.g., between women, between men, and between women and men). While discussing oral sex, one said:

I mean, when I was with guys and was doing those kinds of things, I didn't think it was sex. Now that I'm with a girl- when I'm with girls and I'm doing that kind of stuff, I totally think it's sex. (Ava)

Another participant stated that sex “with a man is just consists of penis vag, and with girls it's going down and fingers- it's all sex.” (Cynthia).

**Negotiating (hetero)sexist culture.** In discussing the development of their understandings of sex, participants discussed how they negotiated cultural (hetero)sexism. In this section, participants discuss media representation and messages about women's sexuality; their need to learn how to have sex with women; the absence of safer sex knowledge and resources; and their active research on sex.

***Media messages about sex.*** Participants were asked questions about gendered messages about sexual pleasure within mainstream media as well as its representation of sex between women.

***Gendered messages.*** All participants agreed that there were gendered messages about pleasure within mainstream media. The most common gendering cited by participants was the privileging of men's pleasure over women's. One participant said: “I, personally, think it's all about men's pleasure right now. It's- I get frustrated with those stupid Cosmo articles, ‘How to please your man’. Dude, what about pleasing yourself? Or teaching your man how to please you?” (Jody). Another said “For the most part, we don't really get many messages about our own pleasure. And if we do, they're kind of couched in this presentation that's really geared towards men's pleasure” (Maya). The difference in social acceptance of explicit discussion of sexual pleasure, where it is not as acceptable for women to discuss sexual pleasure openly and explicitly as it is for men, was also discussed by some participants. One described this dynamic by saying: “It also feels, when I talk with someone -or when I talk about sex with other women,

it's more behind closed doors, whereas my sense of, with men, it's more of a joking public thing” (Taylor). A few participants discussed how the discussion of pleasure in general was flattened and lacked nuance. One participant discussed this as it related to discussion of men’s pleasure in saying:

I think men's sexual pleasure is- it almost feels obvious, like the way it's sort of culturally displayed, it's simplified to the point where it's so obvious...It's in the world of tits and ass, it's boners and filling that condom ...I don't know what it's like to be a man, but I hope it's reduced to these things. (Bailey)

Participants were asked if they thought it was easier to reject gendered messages about sexual pleasure when having sex with a woman. They were fairly evenly split, with many believing that the person they were having sex with made a more significant difference than the gender of their partner, and others believing that it was easier to reject those messages when having sex with women. One participant described the first perspective as:

I really think it does just depend on the person. I've met- I've met women who were queer and have had conversations with them about how they're ... with like their girlfriends going down on them, or fingering them, but they will not finger themselves, because they don't want to touch themselves, because they don't, it's just a thing that they're not comfortable doing. And I'm just like ‘Why? What did somebody say to you about that place? Oh, dear, not another one’. So yeah, I think it really does depend on the person. (Brooke)

Of the women who believed it was easier to reject gendered messages about pleasure when having sex with women, most cited the ability to think more creatively about sex, and the ability to simply escape the focus on men as their reason. In answering the question of whether it is easier to reject gendered messages about pleasure in sex with women, one said:

I think so. Just because it's- yeah. I do, just because it's- you've got different ways to explore pleasure, and things to try- or different things are focused on more. You know? When you're having sex with women, you don't necessarily have a penis in the room... There's more focus on what you like and what you enjoy, just in terms of your own body. (Jody)

*I can't put together the in-betweens: Media representation of sex between women. All*

participants agreed that there were not adequate representation of sex between women in the media. Some participants discussed that representation of sex between women is not equivalently explicit to the representation of sex between women and men. One participant described this as:

I think queer sex is still in a place where on, let's say, let's say more mainstream media, where I think- I think there's a double standard, so where you'd see a heterosexual couple do certain things in a romantic storyline, you don't see queer, same sex couples do sort of equal levels of things in that storyline. And I think queer sex is still in a place where it's the pan-away. (Bailey)

This unequal representation was criticized by some participants, arguing that it leads to a less clear individual understanding of what sex between women is. Bailey went on to say:

There's sort of a dearth of available knowledge, and then on top of that you add that, that might fly, that might play out okay when it's heterosexual sex, and people are like "I can imagine, I can put together the in-betweens", but it doesn't really play the same way when that one same-sex women's storyline in that one show isn't, managing to clear that up for people.

Participants also problematized the tendency for imagery of sex between women to be appropriated by the male gaze within mainstream media. In describing plot lines where female characters who are understood to be heterosexual engage in sexual contact with other women and then return to sexual relationships with men, one participant stated "It's very much a fetishized version of male fantasies...It basically says that women's sexuality is an extension of male sexuality, sorry, is an extension of their fantasies, and eventually it will just turn back and just go on its proper course" (Dani).

*Needing to lean how to have sex with women.* In discussing how they developed their understandings of sex, participants discussed the various channels through which people learn about sex, including media representation, sex education, discussions with friends, and having role models. Many described the heterocentrism of these systems (particularly the media and sex



education), stating that people are constantly 'taught' how to be heterosexual, and thus effort needs to be made to learn how to be anything else. Participants both discussed how there is a much less clear picture of how women have sex with each other, and how there is a very clear script to how women have sex with men. In discussing the former, one stated:

In any new relationship or pairing or whatever, it takes some time to get to know how things are going to work for your two bodies, and the dynamics of your relationship. But then on top of that it's going to take some time to figure out how to F women, you know? (Bailey)

In discussing the relative clarity of the script for sex with men, Jody stated:

I knew more with men, I knew what I was supposed to do more, just because I'd seen it, in porn or movies or books- you know. It's- you can't hide from that. It's just -you figure it out. So I guess in that respect, I was- I had a role to play, I guess. Is what it really was. It's like- 'Okay, this is what I do'.

***That's your penalty for being a dyke: Lack of safer sex knowledge/ resources.*** While no questions were asked regarding safer sex, many participants commented on their lack of safer sex knowledge regarding sex between women and the absence of safer sex resources for sex between women. Many women discussed previous lack of knowledge of dental dams as emblematic of their lack of knowledge of safer sex between women in general. One woman compared this to the education she received about condoms in sex education in high school in saying "I do recall a Mr. Woody, so I guess we learned how to put on condoms, but definitely I didn't know what a dental dam was until, you know, a little while ago" (Bailey). Lack of knowledge of dental dams was not the only barrier to their use discussed by participants- another mentioned financial barriers to the use of dental dams:

Well, that's your penalty for being a dyke. There you go. You want to be a dyke? 2 bucks! Every time. That's the punishment. You can get condoms for free, and I know they say you can cut a condom in half, but who's going to do that? It's awkward enough to put on a plastic sheet, but you want me to first cut it and maneuver it? No. (Dani)

The inequality of education and resources regarding safer sex was a strong concern for at least one participant, who felt a frustration at the heterosexism inherent to the situation, and her continued sense of not having adequate information. Dani said:

It's a lot more work. And I don't want to have to put out that much extra work. If nobody else has to do, then why should I? I have to do research, I have to find things on obscure websites just to know the basics that other people get told the basics as they apply to them in grade six... To be quite honest, I feel like I don't know enough yet. I know some general ideas about dental dams and gloves and what not. What I would like to know is who uses it, how often is it used... I don't know what the ground rules are, and I wish I did. I wish I had a better source of information for that. Even the friends that I talk to about sex, I don't think they have a good sense of that either, so I wish there was a survey about that. How many people actually use saran wrap, that's what I want to know.

*Active research on sex.* Related to the dearth of information regarding sex between women within mainstream media, almost all participants discussed research they had done on their own regarding sex, particularly sex between women. For many, this search was related to a broader desire to know more about the LBGTQ community in general. Participants described looking for information/representations in books, television/movies, and the internet. Many participants described their search simply for accurate representations of queer women, as well as sex between women. One described this need in saying “when I started to come out to myself, I started to crave representations of myself” (Bailey). Another discussed her dissatisfaction with images readily available, in saying:

Again, it was a gradual process, but it is more because I actively took the time and the effort to really find and seek it out, because I wasn't satisfied with the heterosexual images I was getting of it being for straight people, and lesbian being seen as objects in that way. (Alexis)

Some participants described a process of seeking out the script for sex with women; a few described, given how scripted sex between women and men is, how they felt that there must be similarly rigid guidelines for sex between women, and thus felt the need to find these guidelines. One participant describes this process:

When you don't know what sex is or supposed to be, and you have, but you have this feeling in you that sex is supposed to be a specific something, you know what I'm saying? Then, and then you, and in my process, you search out representations of it, so that I could glean more about it, so I could learn more information about it. Yeah. Then- then, yeah, it sort of creates for me an image of what sex is supposed to be. (Bailey)

Other participants described that their investigation of sex was less about finding equivalent guidelines to heterosexual sex, and was more directed at being inspired regarding what sex between women could be like. One woman described this by saying:

Before I had sex, it was very much just me exploring things and seeing things and wanting to learn 'What is sex? What can sex involve? What does it look like? Who has it?' And it really was just me being 'Nobody knows about this stuff, this is just me, nobody knows what's going on!' It was like my secret research. So I wasn't really thinking about like what was right or wrong about sex, I was really just interested in what it was and all the multiple aspects of it sort of thing. (Brooke)

**Conclusion.** For participants, developing an understanding of sex was often complicated and not aided by the cultural silence regarding sex between women. Participants discussed needing to develop an understanding of sex for themselves, whether through sexual experiences (particularly with partners who had experience of sex with women), self reflection, seeking information/representation of sex, or a combination thereof. Most had held a (hetero)centric definition of sex which they later changed or broadened to include sex between women. Participants discussed several explicitly (hetero)sexist aspects of cultural definition/representation of sex, and how they negotiated this.

## **Section 2: Expectations and Experiences of Sex**

This section focuses on participants' experiences of sex with women, concentrating on their first experiences as well as unique elements of sex between women.

**First time sex.** Participants discussed aspects of their first experiences of sex with women, whether their expectations matched their experience of sex, and the significance of their first time sex with women versus men (for those who have also had sex with men).

*How am I supposed to know what to do? Aspects of first sex with women.* When describing their first sexual experience with a woman, many women described them as positive, using words such as “good” and “fun”. One participant described it as:

It wasn't anything super spectacular, but it was really nice. It was really cathartic in some ways, even though we didn't really, we didn't really do tons of things, we didn't get crazy. But it was very innocent and good. (Brianna)

Many participants also described how they needed to learn how to have sex with women, and thus their early experiences were not as flowing as later experiences. One participant highlights her frustrations in saying:

Well, I didn't know really what I was doing the first time, the first couple times, to [my partner's] dismay. But eventually, eventually I got over-you know, I would keep stopping. I just- I just didn't, I would get frustrated that it wasn't happening, and then I would get angry, and I would stop. But like, after awhile I was just like no, I'm going to keep going, I'm one of those people that- and it worked out. (Cynthia)

This experience of not knowing how to have sex with women, or not knowing what to expect was associated with anxiety and a sense of terror for many participants. One woman described it by saying:

To me, I was confused, I was scared, like I said- terrified is the best way to describe it. I just didn't know what it meant, I didn't know what she expected of me, I felt all this pressure, because of assumptions that I thought of- well I don't know what to do, I've never been with a woman, how am I supposed to know what to do? (Alexis)

Some participants had several experiences associated with their first sex: some described confusion over whether they had in fact had sex or not. One participant illustrates this in saying “I definitely didn't know if it was sex. Because I was so just like- is that sex?” (Ava). A few women said that their first sexual experiences were not planned or well discussed; for one participant, this meant that it was not a good experience of sex:

We didn't really take the time to ask each other what we liked, what we didn't like, and it was both of [our] first experiences with women, so we were trying to figure it all out, and yeah- so it wasn't very good. (Jody)

The experience of internalized homophobia was connected to the first experience of sex with a woman by one participant, who discussed how shame at sex with a woman intersected with desire and identity:

I had all this internal homophobia that I had to deal with, like obviously I didn't want to be gay, I didn't want to enjoy this, and oh my god, I really liked it, what does that mean? Am I, am I gay, am I a lesbian, am I queer? Ahh! (Jody)

*Expectations of first sex.* Participants were asked whether their first experiences of sex with women matched their expectations. Many stated that they did not have expectations when they had sex for the first time. Some participants described this as not knowing what to expect, some as not having preconceived ideas of what it would be like, and some simply had had sex prior to even considering what it would be like. One of the women illustrates this last category in saying:

My first few times were before I really expected anything, like we're talking high school sleepovers and drinking from the parent's liquor cabinet and whoops here we go, right, so I don't think there were any expectations. It wasn't something that I really built up, it was something that happened. (Dani)

While many participants discussed fear and anxiety prior to the first experience of sex, many said that it was a more pleasant and less anxious experience than they had expected. One said that “it was just much more pleasant than I thought it would be- not that I thought that it would be unpleasant, just I thought it would be a lot more difficult than it was” (Alexis). One participant, however, related this anxiety about sex to her use of alcohol/drugs during her first sexual experiences. When asked for more details about her first experiences, they said:

Honestly, that's quite hard, because I was pissed drunk. And I will not be able to tell you of any experiences up to getting into the double digits where I wasn't either pissed drunk or stoned off my ass. Because I was really scared. (Dani)

Some women described their first sex as being more awkward, and less glamorous than they had anticipated. One illustrates this in saying: “It was less glamorous. I don't know that anyone ever expects their first time to be as awkward, like maybe you make some allotment for awkwardness, but you never expect it to be so like- unsmooth” (Bailey).

Some participants discussed their expectations regarding their first sex with men. All but one of the participants had had sex with men at some point in their lives, and most said they were underwhelmed and disenchanted with their first experience of sex with men. One said “I didn't really feel- I mean, aside from kind of bewilderment and disbelief that it- I was expecting something a little bit more pleasurable than what ended up happening” (Brianna).

***Holy shit, colours are brighter: Significance of first sex.*** Participants who had had sex with both women and men were asked how their first experience of sex with women compared in significance to their first one with men. There was much variety among participants' sexual histories: some had sex with women first, some had sex with men first, some stopped having sex with men after having sex with women, some currently have sex with both women and men, and some had very fluid sexual identities and did not categorize their sexual partners by gender. Many participants said that their first sex with a woman was more special than their first sex with men. One described this by saying:

I think there was more of a celebration when I had sex with women, just because it was an eye opening new experience for me, but of course this was too when I had sex with men, but it wasn't-well, I guess it was eye opening, in fact I was like, ‘Oh my god, I can enjoy this’. So that was exciting. But it wasn't the same like, ‘Holy shit, colours are brighter!’ that it was when I came out. (Jody)

Many participants described their first sex with a man as less significant, more disappointing, and less pleasurable compared to their first sex with a woman. One woman recounted:

I think it was better because of just the emotional connection between me and her than between me and him. The other guy- I was okay with doing it, but it hurt and it wasn't

even that it was really painful, it was just uncomfortable, and was just kind of really awkward, and just-boring, it was just like, it was just boring, I don't even know how to explain it. That's the only word I can think of. (Ava)

Some women found it very difficult to compare their first sexual experiences with women and men, as they were in quite different life situations for each. One describes this as:

I wouldn't say more significant, but I was quite- the first time I had sex with a woman, I was 20, and the first time I had sex with a man, I was 26 ...I guess the difference is that I was more sexually confident when I was having sex with a man, but that was just a reflection of my age and experience. (Lily)

**Elements of sex between women.** In this section, participants unique elements of sex between women and the power dynamics of sex between women in comparison to those between women and men.

*With women, we can just do anything: Unique elements of sex between women.* When asked if they believed if there were unique elements of sex between women, some participants explicitly rejected this idea. Some discussed how they did not think about sex on the basis of their partner's gender, as Brooke says here:

So I don't really think about what's unique about this, I think well what's unique about that was I was upside down. So yeah, it's just, I've never really thought about like the- the uniqueness or the difference between the two, because it's all- people are people in my mind.

Another woman discussed how when she was only having sex with women, she did believe there to be unique elements to it, but after having sex with men, she changed her perspective:

There was a little bit of a radical lesbian separatist in me, there was a little bit that was 'All I need is us', which is- and also that was pretty convinced about the fact that there was possibility for greater pleasure between women than a man and a woman....but now, I've kind of seen a whole range of possibility and behaviour and emotional investment or lack thereof, and pleasure with both men and women, so I don't think that they're that different, necessarily. (Maya)

Many other participants identified elements that they believed to be unique to sex between women. The most common feature mentioned was a greater sense of warmth and intimacy to

sex between women. One participant describes this by saying “I feel so much, it's just so much more warmth and I just feel emotions more intensely, I feel love more intensely through that experience than I do with, or that I did when I was having sex with men” (Brianna). Many participants also discussed how sex with women was less orgasm/penis focused than sex with men, and thus had a broader scope. Jody discussed how she found it easier to broaden her scope of sex when having sex with women in saying:

Orgasm. That's the ultimate goal of sex! And I've tried to veer away from that in my definition of sex... I think with women, it's easier for me to forget about that part, whereas with men- it's what you're supposed to do!

Lily also discussed how having a less clear script for sex between women meant that it could be more flexible:

Sex with a man is pretty limited in terms of- for example, with a woman, I don't feel like there's any boundaries in a sense, because I think we're socialized that way, like I said with sex ed, this is the way to have sex. Whereas with women- it's just- for example with women, we can just do- anything. And the sex for me lasts a lot longer, with women. And it's just a matter of being more versatile.

Some participants discussed the creativity they felt was more available to them in sex with women. Brianna explained this in saying:

I feel like it can be more creative. And I feel like -I feel like all of the things that are available to me in a hetero context are still available to me in a, you know, lesbian context- but it just feels like there's, like there's more creativity. I feel more engaged in the sexual act than I did in a hetero context.

Some women said that they found sex between women to flow more naturally, and require less thought, than sex with men; Brooke describes this as:

There's just a certain aspect of it where it's not as like flowing and just completely- like I have to think about what I'm doing when I'm having sex with men, whereas with women it's sort of like ‘Well, this is what I do’.

Women also described feeling more safety and comfort when having sex with women.



*Power dynamics.* In comparing their experiences of sex with women to those with men, many participants referred to differences in power dynamics. Many said that they felt they were more submissive in the sex they had with men, and believed that they could be more equal in sexual relationships with women. In talking about beginning to have sex with women, Brianna stated:

I find now that I I've come into my dominant self a lot more, I'm more, when I was having sex with men, I was much more submissive than I am now, and I find that I can, I can be dominant, or I can be more submissive, or it can be very, very equal, I find, and I guess that goes back to the creativity piece. I just find that I can experience a range of so many more identities, I guess, in sex, than I can, or that I could in a hetero context. In a hetero context, I was always, it always felt like I was a certain way, I had to be a certain way. I don't find that in a queer context.

The experience of being boxed into submissive roles with men and being freer to choose roles for themselves with women was discussed by many participants. Jody talked about this freedom in sex with women by saying: "That's one of the huge things that I love about it- I don't have to be the submissive one, or I don't have to- I can be dominant or not, and I don't have to feel like it's not my place". Dani also discussed how:

There's always an expectation ... even if you're being the top, you have to do it in a submissive, traditionally feminine way with a man, whereas in sleeping with women, the power dynamic can be whatever you want it to be... I found with men I acted quite strongly as a top, as a reaction against it, always trying to gain the upper hand. And it's only now that I'm comfortable doing other roles in that, because I don't feel that I'm being forced into them.

Some participants did not believe the difference in power dynamics to be based on the gender of their partners: one participant discussed BDSM as a situation where for her, the roles taken on by herself and her partner were more significant to their power dynamics than the gender of her partner. She said "It's not necessarily gender specific, but more characteristic specific. We can both have both sides, or some people don't- yeah, I think BDSM is a good place to explore those sides" (Taylor).

**Conclusion.** Participants were asked about their expectations and experiences of sex, with a particular focus on their first experience of sex with women. Almost all discussed a sense of anxiety or fear before their first experience of sex with women, although they now generally associate positive emotions with those first experiences. When asked about elements of sex between women, some participants rejected the idea of there being unique aspects to sex between women. Many discussed differences in power between sex with women and sex with men, particularly the experience of being more submissive in sex with men.

### **Section 3: Desire and Sexual Identity**

In this section, participants discuss recognition and negotiation of their sexual desires and their negotiation of their sexual identities.

**Desire.** While participants were never directly asked about their sexual desires, many discussed the negotiation of desires throughout their lives, particularly in relation to their experience of sex education, sex with men, and attraction to women.

*I don't know that I was looking: Representation in sex education.* Participants were asked if they felt represented in school-based sex education at the time they were receiving it. While all said that the sex education they received focused exclusively on heterosexual sex and most participants criticized the sex education they received from their current standpoint, not one said that they felt excluded at the time they were receiving the education. Many women said that they did not feel disconnected from their sex education, because at the time they had no recognition of their desires to have sex with women. Some described this as a process of repression, such as Brianna:

I didn't feel disconnected from it because I was in absolute, complete denial about anything sexual related to women. I kind of after the experience with the girl when I was

8, I kind of didn't think about it or talk about it with anyone, like until I was like 15. So, I mean grade 9 I would have been 14ish, so - I didn't, I didn't experience any kind of disconnect with any of that at all.

Other participants described identifying as heterosexual at the time, and thus not feeling any exclusion on the basis of their sexual orientation, which Bailey illustrates in saying:

I didn't come out to myself until after that- so- I don't know that I was looking. So I think- I think, in my understanding, in my identity at that point in time, I thought I was heterosexual, so I thought I would have felt represented just like everyone else.

Some women felt a lack of desire for sex with men, but had no realization that there were other ways to be, and thus did not feel excluded. Jody describes this by saying:

I wasn't really interested in men. So I was kind of like 'Oh, okay, that's a penis. Good times'...I wasn't really thinking that I was different, I was like 'Oh, okay, I haven't met the right guy' type thing... I guess I didn't know that I wanted to be represented, or that I needed to be represented, because I didn't even know at that point that there were other ways of being.

Some women described not feeling as though they needed to know about sex between women, which included both those who recognized their desires to have sex with women and those who did not. Dani describes the latter experience as:

I had sex ed in grade 9, and at the time I was identifying as bisexual and I was- I had this weird thing going on in my head where I acknowledged that I was bisexual, but I figured I didn't have to worry about the queer part of that, I would just focus on the straight part, and then everything would be okay, so, I sort of pushed that to the side, and figured that I was learning everything I needed to know.

One participant described how sex education was discounted by all her friends, and thus while she did not feel included, she did not feel excluded either. She said:

Sex ed was in middle school, was already a giggly topic for everybody, so it wasn't taken seriously. Then sex ed in high school wasn't taken seriously because we all thought we knew what we were doing anyway. So in both counts, it was discredited no matter what. (Maya)

While participants were not necessarily critical of the sex education at the time they received it, most were critical when reflecting on it. The most common criticisms were its

exclusively heterosexual focus, although one participant transferred to a queer-centric high school, where she participated in more inclusive sex education. Participants also criticized the biological and anatomical focus of sex education, as well as its narrow focus on reproduction, as well as the universalization of birth control that occurred.

*I can check this off of my list: (Lack of) desire and sex with men.* While many participants were interested in and enjoyed sex with men, and some were in sexual relationships with men, pleasure in those sexual experiences with men was not universal among participants. Some described sex with men as occurring out of expectation more so than actual desire. When discussing their histories of sex with men, some women described how their own sexual desires were suppressed. Some referred to sex with men (particularly early sex with men, or sex with men prior to sex with women) as unsatisfying, and felt their partner's pleasure was prioritized more than their own. Brianna describes this by saying:

I was performing for the man I was having sex with. And it was not pleasurable. I felt like I had to make sure that he knew that I was enjoying it. Or that he knew that I was. I had to make sure that he knew that he was good in bed. Just to protect his ego, somehow. And it just, the, I just got tired of the constant denial of my own pleasure and my, that, that denial of self, I guess.

Another participant described her first sexual experiences with men that also centered on the pleasure of her partners and did not reflect her own sexual desire:

Investigator: Can I ask- why did you have sex with men if you weren't particularly interested in it? Or if it seems like you didn't get a lot of pleasure out of it?

Taylor: I just thought it was me- I thought there was something wrong with me. But I didn't think that would be answered by being with women. I just thought that I wasn't a very sexually pleased person.

Some women described sex with men as something inevitable, and felt that they should "get it over with". This was not described as a negative experience by these participants, simply as one that they felt they should do. Maya described this as "The first time I had sex with a man

was like-there was a certain cursory ‘Okay, finally I can check this off of my list’, and it was fun, it was fine. But the emotional significance is not there”.

***Desire for women.*** Some participants discussed negotiation of their desire for sex with women. Some described their initial lack of recognition of sexual desire for women, such as Cynthia, who said:

Because at the time, like I don't know- because I'm bi, I do like boys, and I do like girls, and it's just- it just took awhile for it to click that I liked girls the same way I liked boys. It took awhile to click, right. I was like ‘Oh’! Some times I'd like see their hair, and I'd be like- I don't know if I want to- if that'd be a great haircut, or it's like I'm attracted to- it's a confusing thing, it's a confusing- grey lines, but yeah- eventually I got it and was ‘Oh, okay’.

Cynthia connected her lack of recognition of her desire for women to her education in Catholic schools, where she was not taught about sex between women. Other participants described scrutinizing their own desire for women; they described initially not being sure of their sexual desire, and not having their desire confirmed until they had sexual contact with women. Taylor describes this as:

When I would make out with girls at the bar, it was still this- this awkward figuring it out. I felt like a teenager, being ‘Oh I can grope this!’ and ‘Oh wow! Am I attracted to this?’ I was doing a lot of self analysis, which kind of killed it for me.

***Sexual identity.*** Many participants had a complex history regarding their sexual identities. Many had shifted their identities multiple times over their lives, with some participants currently having multiple sexual identifications. Further, women who used the same label did not necessarily have the same sexual behaviour. Many participants identified as queer; some of them did not intend to have sex with men in the future, some were open to the possibility of sex with men but were more drawn to women, and some were in relationships with men. Lily, the only participant who identified solely as lesbian in the interview, occasionally had sex with men. Participants were very mindful of their

sexual identities, and many put much thought into the labels they used. Differences in sexual behaviour within the same sexual identity category seemed to reflect the complexity of identification rather than confusion or inconsistency. Participants discussed the negotiation of their sexual identity, why they use the labels they do, and whether their sexual identity was important to them.

*Negotiation of sexual identity.* Many participants described having had multiple sexual identities over the course of their lives so far. The complexity of sexual identity, and the many meanings that they hold for participants was made quite clear. Further, some women stressed that previous sexual identities were clear and distinct, and not transitional. During the member check, Dani explained this as:

It wasn't that I said one thing because I wasn't ready to come out or anything like that, it's that my identity has actually changed because I've grown as a person, and I think an acknowledgement- I mean that happens in other things too, I mean your professional identity changes over time- it's not that you weren't really a student before, you just, you were a student at the time, and now you're working or whatever.

While there were many different paths of changes to sexual identity, some common areas where they changed included when negotiating desire for women, when negotiating desire for masculinity (which sometimes, but not always included desire for sex with men), and rejection of the gender binary.

*What does it mean? Desire for Women.* Many participants related discussion of recognition/repression of sexual desire for women with initial questioning/changes to their sexual identity. Some women described a sudden change in identification following sexual activity with women, such as Lily who said:

I knew the second she kissed me that I was gay, I just- it was this feeling- even though- I was attracted to guys, growing up. It wasn't like the whole being straight in high school thing was forceful, like 'Ugh, have to date this guy', so

yeah- I was attracted to men, and I made out with men, and I was turned on by men, but- that kind of experience with a women was a different level, it was- it was a completely different feeling.

For Lily, this sudden realization followed a longer period where she had been considering whether she was lesbian:

I actually did research into it, who does that? ...I was like- "I think there's something up here", and then I ...bought a hardcover book on coming out stories, because I had to do my research before I was gay.

In contrast, some participants discussed a process of questioning their identity following sexual activity with women, such as Jody, who reflected on her first experience of sex with another woman in saying:

I had all of that social anxiety I guess, and I had all of that 'What does it mean?' issues. Labeling and all that kind of stuff. So that was huge for me. Just dealing with all the homophobia and 'Does this mean I'm gay-gay', and 'How gay am I'?

*All of a sudden, it doesn't fit! Desire for Men/Masculinity.* Participants also discussed how desire for masculinity and/or experience of sex/relationships with men related to their negotiation of sexual identification. For some participants, sex with men caused them to question and change their identity, such as Jody (who currently identifies as queer), who said:

I had identified as a lesbian before I had sex with men, and then I was- I was mostly just confused when I had sex with men, because I was like 'What the fuck does this mean for my identity? What?' because I'm like 'I'm a lesbian. Who apparently has hetero tendencies?'

For some participants, the change from lesbian identity to queer identity was connected to desire for masculine, although not necessarily male, partners, as Dani describes:

I wrote on your questionnaire that I identify as queer, not as lesbian, and that's sort of been a journey for me too, in- well, my partner currently identifies as a butch/drag king, so at certain times, my partner is a man, not male, but a man. And that took me a really long time to accept that that's what I wanted... The movement to queer was inspired by my choice of partners, because if my partner is being a man at this moment, then all of a sudden, it doesn't fit!

Dani and another participant were partnered with trans men, and discussed their

conceptualization of the gendering of the sex they had with their partners, and how this related to their sexual identities. Dani said:

Sometimes my partner's a man, and sometimes as a man, and me as a woman, we have queer sex. And you know what? There are times when he's a man, and I'm a woman and we have hetero sex. And that was really weird at first, that took a lot to come to terms with. And that was like a big identity crisis- 'Oh my god, am I still a dyke'?

Taylor described this by saying:

For me, he's everything. He's my male partner, but- and I still kind of struggle with it myself. You're also my lesbian lover to me, and he feels the same way towards me, so it's- we've talked about it where we feel like we're totally a gay couple, but we're also totally heterosexual. So it- so I'd say our sex is queer, but I don't feel like I'm having sex with a woman.

Desire for men was not always related to identification; for Lily, sex with men did not change her identification:

Even though I identify as a lesbian, I have had sex with men...Some of my friends say that means you're bisexual, but I'm like no. No, that's not what it is. I've clearly- I don't feel torn or feeling like 'Oh I'm bi' or whatever, I mean- I feel very confident that I'm a lesbian.

Some participants had negative elements associated with having desire/sex/relationships with men, such as Taylor, who said: "It's hard because I really- it's sad for me to let go of the lesbian part...I kind of went through a grieving process of coming back to being heterosexual". The association of sex with men as a regression to heterosexuality was also discussed by Dani, who said: "Because I thought that if you add in this masculine element, then all of a sudden it's a step back. And going back into this straight sex".

Some participants currently in relationships with men emphasized the importance of their identification to not be seen to be heterosexual, as Taylor states: "However, I still- I do like people to know that I'm not heterosexual. It is something I feel is important for people to know". Alexis further emphasized the importance of recognition of identity, rather than assuming sexuality from her current sexual partner, in saying:



It's very important to me to get across to people that just because I'm with a man or a woman doesn't mean that I'm straight or a lesbian. I'm pansexual, my fluidity is with me at all times, it doesn't stop because I'm with one person.

*Rejecting Gender Binary.* Participants also discussed changes to their identification following questioning/rejecting the gender binary. For many women, this was related to a change away from or an avoidance of the “bisexual” identity in favour of “queer” or “pansexual”, which were seen to recognize more gender fluidity. Jody discusses this process in saying:

Well, I started off defining myself as a lesbian, and then as I learned more about trans people and other forms of gender identity and expression, I was, I kind of threw out the whole idea of the gender binary, so I liked queer as an umbrella term.

The need for explicit inclusion of trans and genderqueer people in their sexual identity was discussed by other participants as well in relation to their change to a broader sexual identity, as Brooke highlights here in her discussion of change to use of the “pansexual” identity:

You know, it was just, it didn't make sense to me that someone would be like ‘I like men, and I like women, but I don't like anything in between or anything outside of that’ ... I'm not going to use something as- that I find to be as arbitrary and such a social idea as gender to be my reason to not caring about someone or be with someone.

*Why they use labels.* Participants in the study identified in the interviews as queer, pansexual, bisexual, and lesbian. As there is great flexibility in meaning within these words, they were asked why they chose the label they use. Many participants that shared the same label had different patterns of the genders of their partners, and women with different sexual identities gave many of the same reasons regarding their choice of label.

Many cited their predominant attraction to women as the reason for their label choice, which included women who identified as QPBL. Many participants, all of whom identified as queer, also discussed connotations they held with other labels as the reason why they chose to use “queer”. Participants discussed the pansexual label as not being intelligible to their

friends/family, and as being too broad for their sexual identity. Many discussed the restrictions they felt to be associated with the lesbian label, both in terms of restrictions on who they could have sex with, and in their own gender identity. Some participants also discussed limiting or narrow aspects of the lesbian community, particularly denigration of sex with men, as their reason for not selecting that label. Further, some discussed the bisexual label as not emphasizing their attraction to women sufficiently, and as being limiting due to its invocation of the gender binary. Taylor summarized some of these ideas in saying “I find there's a lot of social ideas around lesbians, and dykes, and gays- and there is with queers, but I think queers- it's a term that hasn't been used as much”.

Some women discussed how they framed their sexual attractions towards people, rather than genders, and this was why they chose their label. Some connected this with a rejection of the gender binary; Jody describes this by saying:

I kind of threw out the whole idea of the gender binary, so I liked queer as an umbrella term. And I was like- I don't want to rule anybody out. Especially when I started having sex with men, I was like ‘Okay, now I really don't want to rule anybody out’, but at the same time, I'm like ‘I'm not hetero’. I'm not, you know?

Many participants discussed this desire to not rule people out, and to have flexibility with the label they were using. Bailey discussed her choice of “queer” in saying “That's what I like about queer. It's super, super anything goes”. Some participants, most of whom were in relationships with men, discussed their choice of label as a way of emphasizing that they are not heterosexual.

***I want other people to know it's okay: Importance of sexual identity.*** Most participants said their sexual identity was an important part of themselves. When asked why, many participants discussed the importance of their sexual identity as a connection to an LGBTQ community. Lily describes this by saying:

When I was coming out it was, and maybe it's very similar for a lot of people, but it was-

it was important to seek because I never had support from my family, until quite recently, and I wouldn't even call them supportive, but they're tolerant. So when I was coming out it was important to get acceptance from my friends and- to be part of the queer community, because that helped the process.

For many participants, their sexual identities were important as it drove their interest in activism.

In describing why her sexual identity was important, Jody said:

I guess because of the human rights issues. And the politics that, I don't know, I just- I'm an activist, and when I came out, I was- I had a lot of anger towards our society and how it's been so ingrained in my head that I'm like 'It's wrong'! Still!

The importance of their identity as a source for activism was connected to the importance of being visibly out to other people. Jody connected the two in saying:

It's a big part of who I am, because I want other people to know it's okay. I grew up, and I thought it was wrong, and I didn't let myself be gay or queer or whatever I want to define it as, because I didn't know any better! And it's so-that to me is heart breaking that I didn't have that kind of knowledge, or that kind of support, and I guess I just- for me it's important to do activist and activisty kinds of things with my identity or my orientation just because I, I think it's important to have people who are out and visible.

Some participants described how being QPBL gave them a different standpoint, and thus was a very important part of their identity, as Dani makes clear here "Why is it important- because it's a huge part of who I am. It changes how I interact with the world, changes how the world interacts with me certainly, it changes the experiences I have". Some participants discussed the intersections between their various identities, and how they felt their sexual identity was important, but not as important as the totality of their identities. Dani responded to my question about the importance of their sexual identity in saying "I always find that question hard, because it's like the whole, you know, you can't take one part of your identity, and say this is the most important part of me".

The participants who did not consider their sexual identity to be important said that their sexual identity had been important in the past, but was no longer important, as their communities did not place importance on sexual identity. Brooke describes this as:

My sexual orientation at this point is just a- it's something that I- like I said, I'm lucky enough to be around people that it's a thing that I don't have to think about or worry about or be concerned about who I can tell, who I can't tell, that sort of thing. So, yeah. It's just- it's just there.

**Conclusion.** The complexity of the negotiation of sexual desire and sexual identity was made very clear by participants. Simplified understandings of sexuality, including ideas such as individuals having unchanging sexual desires, individuals having one lifelong sexual identity, changes to sexual identification reflecting confusion, individuals sharing the same sexual identity having the same gendered sexual desires or partners, and being able to infer sexual identity from sexual behavior, desire, or a combination thereof were all shown to be inapplicable and insufficient to understanding and describing participants' experiences. Participants discussed their sexual desires, the lack thereof, or the lack of recognition thereof in their discussion of not feeling excluded during sex education, their sense of the inevitability of sex with men, and the difficulty in recognition of their sexual desires for women. They also discussed how recognition of desire, changes of their desires, and changes to their perspectives affected their sexual identities. Further, they discussed why they use the labels they use to identify their sexuality, and whether their sexual identity was an important aspect of themselves.

#### **Section 4: Resistance**

In this section, participants discuss their perceptions of sex between women and of their sexual identities as forms of resistance to (hetero)sexism. Participants were asked if they believed their sexual identity to be a way of resisting what society tells them to be, and were also

asked if they viewed sex between women to be a way of resisting dominant heterosexual norms. Their answers to these two questions were not strongly related.

**Existence as resistance: Sexual identity as resistance.** Most participants believed that their sexual identity was a form of resistance. One did not, stating: “I’ve never used my sexual orientation as like something to resist society with” (Brooke). Many participants saw their mere existence as non-heterosexual within a heterosexist society as a form of resistance; Bailey summarizes this succinctly in saying “I think my existence, my continued everyday existence and my vocal expression of my sexual identity is certainly resistance”. Maya describes how resistance is inherent to any sexual identity that is not heterosexual in saying:

Going back to the idea of a lesbian relationship as somehow being like an act of resistance, it is by its very nature an act of resistance, because you're not doing what you're supposed to do. Just as being queer is not what you're supposed to be doing.

Some participants spoke about the interplay between resistance being forced upon them, and their taking up of that resistance. When asked whether she saw the resistance she felt in identifying as lesbian was put on her by society or was something she took up herself, Lily answered:

Yes it's put on me, for me to accept it, but I- I wouldn't say I enjoy it, but I fully- so that's a really hard question to answer, I feel, because it's like both in a way. You know? That's not the reason why I am, but ...it's like, I will fight for this. And it's great to be part of it. It's great to be part of the revolution. In that sense, and if that makes you a rebel, then- here we go.

Other participants saw their resistance relating to the intersections between their identities. Dani described how her identification as queer was “partially about my sexual identity, and partially about my gender identity. And I think that's very much a resistance, the sort of mixing up the two.” Bailey discussed privilege within the queer community, and how her ethno-racial identity interacted with her sexual identity to create her way of resisting mainstream

society:

The queer women's community is very super, super White, upper middle class, ableist, all that sort of stuff-oriented, right? So- and so is the rest of the world. So it's cool because- it gives me a different spin of resistance, right? I'm not doing my resistance in the same way my sister does it, or my cousin does it, you know? And I'm not doing it the same way as my queer friends do it. So. Yeah, it's fun, it's neat, it's- it sucks sometimes, when you know your community gets boiled down to the select few who- who, like, understand queer women in the first place, and then you're sitting around in a room and everyone else is White, and everyone else comes from a certain background- that sort of sucks.

Some participants discussed how their sexual identity did not originate as a form of resistance, but rather was simply a part of who they were. For some, this was not incommensurable with seeing their identity as a form of resistance: following the questions about sexual identity as resistance, Dani said:

I see all of these questions as very double edged, because in some senses my identity as queer is just who I am, but in other sense, by taking that label onto myself, and by choosing to fight the battles when I could have just said 'This one doesn't matter', or 'This one's too much effort'-that is a way of resisting.

Maya problematized the idea of queer identities as resistance, in saying "But there's also all kind of- all kinds of like normalizing, essentializing aspects of what queer supposedly is that I'm not interested in being a part of either. Regardless, I think that, you know, categories box us in".

**That's not my main political action: Sex between women as resistance.** Most participants did not see sex between women as a form of resistance. Many discussed how they did not have sex to resist the patriarchy, and that they had sex with women because they enjoyed it. Brianna framed this as "I don't want to think about patriarchy every time I'm with my girlfriend, I just want to you know, I'm there for, you know, reasons that are not that noble, not nearly that noble." Ava also discussed the centrality of pleasure in her reason for having sex with women, saying:

No. I do it because I like to have sex with women. I like girls, so that's why- it's not like a feministic antic of mine, it's just because that's who I like to be with, and that's who I'm going to be with. And that's what connects with me. It's not- It's definitely not rebellion.

Many participants problematized the focus on gender; some women saw the idea of sex with women as resistance as valuing this form of sex over other forms of sex. Maya criticizes this, in saying:

I think in some ways that's a cool idea. But I think that to the exclusion or judgment of other people- is not cool... There's too much of that that could potentially lead to being really judgmental of people like me who, you know, then all of a sudden have a relationship with a man. Then it's like- well, that doesn't necessarily make me less queer or whatever, you know, no.

The judgment of queer women who had sex with men was discussed by many participants. In discussing sex between women as resisting, Brooke said:

That doesn't connect to how I think of sex, but I definitely know women who will only have sex with women because they feel that if they had sex with men that they would be betraying their ideals and sort of things. And I've also had people accuse me of betraying my ideals by sleeping with men, which- I'm just sort of like 'Well- sorry'.

Some women believed that resistance was more about the roles taken on during sex, rather than the gender of the people taking part. One also discussed heterosexual appropriation of sexual activity between women, and how that complicates the idea of sex between women as resistance, in saying "then that's getting into the whole bisexuality chic thing, where women are making out at bars to attract men's attention. So is that really resisting hetero culture and hetero norms? I don't know" (Jody).

Participants also discussed how they saw sex as a private act, and thus not a political act.

Illustrating this point, Brianna said:

I do not enjoy making my sex life political. I do a lot of political things in my public life, and for me, I mean- I guess, I guess it can be a political act if- if you think it's a political act, that's fine. For me it just sucks all the life out of it.

Dani also discussed the importance of the public/private divide in relation to sex as resistance, in saying “I mean, bathhouses are a political act. But sex in my own home- most people probably don't know that I'm doing it”.

Some participants discussed the connection of their sexual behaviour to their sexual identity, discussing how their identities and their relationships are more visible, and thus constitute resistance, whereas their sex is private, and thus not necessarily resistance. Dani explained this by saying:

I think there is, there's a sort of political resistance in living a queer identity. And I think that queer sex is a part of that political resistance. But I don't think that queer sex itself is the entirety or even the bulk of that resistance, just living your life as who you are is that resistance aspect, and who I am as is a person who has sex with women, so yeah that's part of it, but that's not my main political action.

One participant believed that sex between women was a form of resistance, saying “I think what I've been saying has- it's kind of lead into that, for me at least, resisting the hetero normative script, and the hetero normative rules of sex and- roles and all of that kind of stuff” (Jody).

**Conclusion.** Participants generally saw their sexual identity as a form of resistance to a (hetero)sexist society, but generally did not see sex between women in the same way. While the answers to these two questions were not strongly related, many participants discussed how they considered more visible aspects of their experience, including their broader identity as QPBL, to be a form of resistance, they considered more private elements, particularly the act of sex, otherwise.

### **Member Check**

After data analysis was completed, participants were invited to take part in a member check, where information from the study would be presented back to them, and I would collect



their feedback regarding my conceptualization of the data. Two participants came to the session, which was conducted in a private room in the Sherbourne Health Centre in Toronto in April, 2010. I prepared a PowerPoint presentation of the context, research questions, demographics, results, and discussion, and let participants choose the sections where we would focus our attention: they were most interested in the discussion. After each section I presented, the participants were asked if they had any feedback, and if my analysis of the data resonated with their experiences.

The two participants did not have any direct objections to my presentation, and largely supported my conceptualizations. They voiced several concerns with the potential of this research to implicitly support myths regarding the sexuality of QPBL women. There was concern that given the absence of a clear definition of sex between women, readers might assume a “fuzzy bunny” model of sex between women, where sexual activity is only gentle and warm, and largely consists of non-genital touching. There was further concern that in problematizing the cultural definition of sex as penile-vaginal, and positing sex between women as not included within that definition, this would invisibilize and possibly denigrate the sex that occurs between women that does involve penises, whether those penises are of flesh or silicon. My conceptualization of the negotiation of sexual identity also raised concerns regarding the potential for discussion of sexual identity as changeable and fluid to delegitimize previous identities held by participants, particularly when they support the myth of the bisexual identity as not a true identity, but as a transitional state between heterosexual and lesbian. Participants emphasized the need to portray these previous identities as genuine identities. The perspectives of these participants were incorporated into the manner in which these sections were presented and discussed in this work.

## Discussion

This research focused on the experiences of 11 young women mainly from Toronto. It was concerned with their exclusion from dominant (hetero)sexist sex scripts. This was examined through a focus on how women who have sex with women develop their understanding of sex, their expectations and experiences of sex, their negotiation of desire and sexual identity, as well as their perceptions of sex between women and their sexual identities as resistance. These four categories will be examined through the lenses of (hetero)sexism and agency, and will be discussed in relation to the concept of third space.

### **(Hetero)sexism**

(Hetero)sexism is foundational to the conceptualization of this study: I assume that the dominant understanding of sex in current Western society centers the prescriptive experiences of heterosexual sex, and does not value those between women. This theme examines the influence of (hetero)sexism on participants' experiences and ideas about sex. As QPBL women experience sexism and heterosexism concurrently, and these two forms of oppression intersect to create new experiences that are distinct from either sexism or heterosexism in isolation, I will be describing their effects together.

The (hetero)sexism of the understanding of sex in dominant culture can be seen to have two main components: erasure of sex between women and appropriation of sex and desire between women by heterosexual men. Ussher (1997) discusses how both of these forces are related in her discussion of how lesbian women are seen as both oversexed and undersexed. The agency and sexual desire of women is denigrated both through the delegitimization and lack of representation/ discussion of sex between women (undersexed), and through the objectification

and exoticization that occurs when sex between women is constructed for the benefit of the male gaze (oversexed).

**Developing understanding of sex.** The effects of (hetero)sexism were clear across the different aspects of the development of participants' understandings of sex, including the sense that there is not enough cultural discussion of sex between women, the common need to change definitions of sex to encompass sex with women, and, clearly, through the negotiation of (hetero)sexism. The experience of both having a greater sense of freedom with sex, and the guilt, anxiety, and self loathing in many participants' development of their understandings of sex with women reflects a culture where sex between women is both denigrated and devalued. With sex between women excluded from the dominant definition of sex, it is both being portrayed as not being the "correct" manner of having sex, and is also less bound up in the script for sex. The (hetero)sexist silence regarding sex between women was also reflected in participants' descriptions of often 'learning how to have sex' from their partners.

(Hetero)sexism was also clearly reflected in changes to participants' definitions of sex. In describing their processes of forming their understanding of sex, particularly their definitions of sex, almost all of the participants described a process where they first had a narrow, heterosexual definition that centered on penile-vaginal intercourse, which they then changed- generally following experiences of sex with women- to a broader definition which allowed for sex between women. Some participants also described taking their initial understanding of sex between women from their ideas of sex with men. Ongoing (hetero)sexism was clear within some participants' discussion of having different definitions of sex dependent on the gender of those involved. The perception of oral sex only counting as sex when done between women can be seen as devaluing these sex acts in comparison to vaginal/anal intercourse.

(Hetero)sexism was also clear in participants' discussion of needing to seek out information/representation to learn how to have sex with women, which was often contrasted to the ubiquity of information about how to have sex with men. Previous and ongoing lacks of knowledge regarding safer sex between women, inaccessibility of information regarding safer sex between women, and barriers to use of dental dams were also discussed by participants, also reflecting the lesser importance placed on sex between women.

**Expectation and experience of sex.** Differences in experiences of sex with men than with women reflect a process by which (hetero)sexist sex scripts may result in differences in sex between women, and sex between women and men. This was reflected in participants' descriptions of first sexual experiences: both the commonality of anxiety as well as the generally higher significance and more positive emotions associated with first sex with women reflect the effects of the enactment of (hetero)sexist sex scripts at the interpersonal level. As sex with men is heavily scripted, whereas sex with women is much less discussed, it follows that participants would feel anxiety at not knowing the "rules" for sex with women, or would be confused at how exactly to translate their understanding of sex with men to sex with women. Further, as the scripts for sex with men are rigid, narrow, and largely focused on men's sexual pleasure, it follows that first sex with men would often be less pleasurable than sex with women. Further still, the cultural centering of sex between women and men and the delegitimization of women's desire and agency in sex scripts could explain the higher significance often placed on first sex with women, as it may affirm agency through deviation from the norm.

The potential (hetero)sexist effects of sex scripts were also reflected in participants' discussion of uniqueness of sex between women, and differences between that and sex with men. It is important to note that I do not mean there to be inherent, essential differences between sex

with men and sex with women. Many participants rejected this idea of essential differences between men and women: the rejection of the gender binary and a complex understanding of the spectrum of gender experience and performance was important to many participants. The idea of there being unique elements of sex between women was outright rejected by many participants, who generally discussed their perception of sex as all being within the same construction, where differences were much more about their partners, rather than their partners' genders. However, many participants did discuss differences in sex with women, particularly differences in power and roles. Submission was often discussed, with many women describing being more submissive with men. Many also described their ability to be more creative during sex with women. All of this is clearly reflective of the male-centered, narrow and rigid scripts for heterosexual sex: while these scripts can be rejected by anyone (and thus sex with men does not have to be less creative, or have a more unequal power dynamic than sex with women, as noted by some participants), it seems more likely that they would be tacitly accepted and enacted during sex with men, particularly first sex, where intrapsychic and interpersonal sex scripts are being constructed and enacted for the first time, and there may be low confidence in deviation from the cultural script.

**Desire and sexual identity.** The process where heterosexuality is assumed for all, learned by all, and unlearned by QPBL women was reflected in participants' discussion of the process of recognizing their desires. Many participants described an initial lack of recognition, lack of understanding, and/or repression of sexual desire for women. This was made clear in their description of experiences with sex education, where none of the participants felt excluded from heterosexually-focused sex education. The lack of valuing of desire was also reflected in some of their descriptions of early sex with men: while some of the women in the study are in

sexual relationships with men, or are interested in sexual relationships with men, some described their early sexual experiences with men as inevitable and/or as unpleasing. The lack of value placed on strong sexual desire for sex with men as a prerequisite for sex with men reflects both compulsory heterosexuality as well as sexist ideas of women as passive receptors of sexual acts. Beyond the centering of heterosexuality and consequent invisibilization of QPBL sexualities, some participants also described experiences with denigration and negativity associated with sex between women. They described experiences of internalized homophobia, including not wanting to enjoy the sex they had with women, feeling guilt at desiring and having sex with women, and not wanting to be QPBL.

**Resistance.** The disjunction between the perception by the majority of participants of their sexual identities, but not sex between women, as a form of resistance to (hetero)sexist ideas can be seen as a reflection of cultural (hetero)sexism. Delegitimizing sex between women, and devaluing women's sexual desires and agency are clearly part of these (hetero)sexist ideas, and these ideas could clearly play a role in participants' rejection of the idea of sex as anything other than a direct expression of their desires. The need to defend the importance of sexual desire and personal agency may be seen as incommensurable with the perception of sex as resistance. Further, the appropriation of imagery of sexual activity between women for heterosexual male viewing pleasure and the heterosexual eroticization of sex between women can be seen as another reason why sex between women (particularly in isolation from QPBL identity) might be seen as not being a form of resistance.

The rejection of sex between women as resistance could be seen as also related to the intense politicization of sex between women that was part of second wave radical feminist ideas about sex, particularly the idea of political lesbianism (the valuing of the choice of only engaging

in sexual relationships with women, regardless of sexual desire, as a feminist act) which was discussed in the (in)famous pamphlet “Love your enemy: The debate between heterosexual feminism and political lesbianism” (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981) and by Frye (1983). This politicization of sex between women as more feminist than other forms of sex could be seen as playing a role in the propagation of ideas of sex between women as less authentic and less based on pure expression of desire than sex with men. Wanting to distance themselves from these ideas could also be a factor in participants’ rejection to the idea of sex between women as resistance. The second wave radical feminist idea of valuing sex with women over sex with men was also discussed as a reason for rejecting the idea of sex between women as resistance: many participants, particularly those who had sex with men, were wary of essentializing differences between sex with women and sex with men. Some participants also discussed how the sex they had with men was also a rejection of dominant (hetero)sexist ideas regarding sex, including discussion of BDSM as a way of subverting the dominant script.

### **Agency**

Participants’ agency played a key role in their negotiation of exclusion from dominant sex scripts. This research uses a Foucauldian conceptualization of power, assuming that power is diffusely organized, is constructed during interactions between individuals, and that the existence of power implies that resistance is possible. These assumptions imply that participants, while clearly marginalized within a (hetero)sexist society, have a degree of agency within this constrained system, which is mediated by experience of other forms of privilege and of marginality.

**Developing understanding of sex.** The dynamic of constrained agency within an oppressive system was a large factor in participants’ discussion of their formation of their

understanding of sex. As their early definitions of sex were generally (hetero)sexist, participants had to recognize their exclusion, and work towards creating a definition of sex for themselves. It was clear that this was an important process for many of them: many were very thoughtful about their definitions of sex. However, while participants were active in the creation of their own definitions, simply recognizing their exclusion, and thus societal (hetero)sexism, did not mean that they were uninfluenced or could wholly separate themselves from this system. Previous definitions of sex with men were used by some participants to inform their understanding of sex with women, and many used this definition to build their definition of sex with women. Further, several participants were inconsistent in their discussion of changes to their definition. A participant and I discussed how this inconsistency could indicate that while rationally recognizing a certain idea to be problematic (in this case, positing orgasm as the goal of sex), it can be very difficult to eliminate emotional responses that support that idea as true (feeling that sex is better with orgasms).

Resistance to dominant ideas about sex was clear not only in many participants' reinvention of their understanding of sex, but also in several participants' explicit rejection of needing to have a clear definition of sex. These participants rejected the need to classify all their experiences, instead trusting their own subjective understanding of whether situations were sexual, and simply enjoying them without needing to define them. This rejection of clear definitions did not make discussion of sex incoherent: many participants seemed to accept and embrace the complexity of sex and sexuality. Resistance to ideas about sex and sexuality were not restricted to dominant heterosexual culture: some participants also discussed ideas about sex and sexuality within lesbian and queer communities as well. Some rejected these ideas as well



and many discussed difficulties with the perceived rigidity of lesbian communities' ideas regarding sex, particularly sex with men.

Participants' agency regarding their understanding of sex was also made quite clear through the discussion of research: while there were no direct questions about independent research, many participants indicated that they had sought out resources (books, movies, websites) in order to teach themselves about sex with women, particularly safer sex with women. Again, this was not a situation where all participants felt enriched by learning for themselves: one participant in particular was quite angry at the unfairness of the relative inaccessibility of information regarding sex between women in comparison to information regarding sex with men.

**Expectation and experience of sex.** The act of having sex with other women, which contradicts the dominant sex script, is clearly a reflection of participants' agency within a heterosexist society. While anxiety, shame, guilt, and other aspects of internalized homophobia were part of many participants' experiences of sex with women (particularly first sex with women), these did not preclude their ability to simply engage in sex with women. The use of sex by some participants as a way to confirm their sexual identity as QPBL also highlights their agency in defining their sexualities and sexual experiences for themselves.

**Desire and sexual identity.** Some aspects of the negotiation of sexual desire highlighted the constraints of participants' agency. The lack of cultural valuing of women's sexual desires, which participants' mirrored in relation to their own, clearly restricts their agency. This was most reflected in some experiences of sex with men, which some participants saw as inevitable, and in which some engaged without strong desire for sex with men. While many participants

had sex with men which was pleasurable and desired, the expectation of sex with men impedes their ability to choose it.

Identity formation was another area where the importance of participants' agency was made clear. Their identities were decidedly not simply determined by their sexual behaviour and the gender of their partners. Many shared sexual identities while not having the same attractions to genders, some did not feel they were attracted to genders, and some participants' sexual identity seemed to be incongruent with their sexual behaviours (e.g., one participant identified as lesbian and occasionally had sex with men). These complexities are not reflective of these participants' confusion, but rather of their complex construction of the meaning of their identities. Many participants described long processes of reflection and change to their identities, and the question of why they identified as they did was clearly one that many had previously reflected upon at length. The process of constructing and claiming an identity for themselves clearly differs from that of people who are heterosexual: heterosexuality is an orientation that is assumed for everyone, whereas non-heterosexual identities need to be actively taken up. As there are many identities for being non-heterosexual, specific identification can be chosen, although the need to identify as something other than heterosexual can be seen as being imposed. Participants' choices are clearly not fully free, as it is the (hetero)sexism of society that deems them different from the heterosexual norm, and thus requires the separate process of identity formation.

**Resistance.** The role of agency may help explain the seeming discrepancy in participants' perception of sexual identity, but not sex between women, as a form of resistance. The ability to construct a sexual identity, and to have a degree of choice in when to make it

visible, may be seen as an area of higher choice (and thus higher agency and resistance) than sexual desire, which may be seen as private and not something chosen.

### **Third space**

While the experience of erasure and appropriation has clear negative impacts, there are some positive elements to them. As dominant sex scripts largely focus on men's sexual pleasure and have a narrow definition of sex, being excluded from these scripts, thus forced to reject assumptions about sex, and to then develop one's own understanding of sex could have benefits. However, the presence of benefits does not negate or compensate for the original exclusion: many participants discussed their preference for more representations/discussion of sex between women over the benefits of cultural silence. The complexity of the experience of marginalization is further explored in the discussion of third space.

The effects of being excluded from the dominant script of sex are clearly complicated for women who have sex with women: the position of being excluded from a dominant idea that is restrictive and damaging has both positive and negative ramifications. The interplay between positive and negative ramifications was discussed in relation to the development of an understanding of sex, particularly first sex. While many participants described early anxiety and confusion when first developing an understanding of sex, many also went on to describe feeling more freedom and creativity in sex with women.

This unique position of experiencing positive and negative ramifications of marginalization can be seen as the occupation of a third space. When Li (2009) discussed third space in relation to the GIPA principle, he emphasized the importance the ideas of individuals who have been marginalized in the creation of social change, and emphasized the uniqueness of their situation for the creation of new, critical ideas. When applying these ideas to the domain of

sexuality, ideas from women who have sex with women regarding decentering penile-vaginal intercourse, taking a broader definition of sex, and being reflexive about the influence of (hetero)sexist ideas on our understanding of sex could challenge and destabilize the dominant construction of sex- to the betterment of all.

## **Conclusion**

### **Principal Findings**

This thesis sought to deconstruct the naturalization of heterosexual sex through discussion of the constructed nature of sex, particularly discussion of the (hetero)sexist effects of dominant sex scripts. The thesis also sought to explore the consequent experience of exclusion from the dominant sex script by women who have sex with women, through discussion of the development of their understanding of sex, their expectations and first experiences of sex with women, the negotiation of their desires and of their sexual identities, and their perceptions of their sexual identity and sex between women as resistance.

In their discussion of developing their understanding of sex between women, participants generally discussed having had a lack of knowledge of sex between women, often learning about it through their first sexual experiences with women. Participants often discussed having had a lack of safer sex knowledge, highlighting their need to seek out resources for themselves and, for a few participants, their ongoing lack of knowledge. Knowledge of dental dams was used as emblematic of knowledge of safer sex between women, although some women discussed not using dental dams in spite of their knowledge of them. Definitions of sex changed, often dramatically, for almost all participants. Early definitions of sex were almost always (hetero)sexist, focusing too narrowly on penises/intercourse, which were generally broadened after experience of sex with women. There was a lack of consensus between participants'

current definitions of sex: many did not have clear definitions, and some outright rejected the usefulness of clear definitions. Despite this lack of clarity, discussions about sex were remarkably coherent, complex, and meaningful.

Related to the lack of prior knowledge of sex between women was participants' lack of clear expectations prior to first sex with women. Almost all participants described fear/anxiety prior to first sex with women. Many associate positive emotions with their first sex with women, although for some, lack of knowledge or adequate preparation prior to sex lead to negative experiences/outcomes. Of participants who experienced and discussed first sex with men, many discussed feelings of being underwhelmed. When asked about uniqueness of sex between women, some participants did not believe there to be anything, while some discussed differences in power dynamics, emphasizing their experiences of being more submissive in sex with men than with women. All but one participant had had sex with both women and men.

When discussing negotiation of sexual desire and sexual identity, many complexities and nuances of experience were made clear. Sexual desires were not always recognized, accepted, and valued in participants' past experiences, particularly in sex education and in sex with men. No participants felt excluded from the (hetero)centric sex education they received in schools, and some discussed a sense of inevitability in sex with men. They also reflected on their processes of sexual identification: many participants had changed their sexual identity more than twice over their lives, and participants sharing the same sexual identity did not necessarily share the same sexual desires or behaviours. Much reflection regarding sexual identification had clearly been done by many participants, and their sexual identity was often considered an important part of themselves.

Participants generally saw their sexual identities as forms of resistance to a (hetero)sexist society, but generally did not see sex between women in the same light. While the answers to these two questions were not strongly related, many participants discussed how while they considered more visible aspects of their experience, including their broader identity as QPBL, to be a form of resistance, they considered less visible elements, particularly the act of sex, as private and not acts of resistance.

### **Study Strengths**

This research focused on creating an in-depth understanding of the experiences and ideas of its participants. Through the use of a qualitative research design, nuances of these experiences and ideas were discussed by participants. The use of semi-structured interviews made space for participants to discuss aspects of their sexual experiences that were most important to them, allowing for a fuller understanding of their lives. Another strength of this study is its role in filling gaps within the existing literature, such as the absence of research that studies of the meaning of sexual activity for women (Harper & Schneider, 2003; Ussher, 2000), the deficiency of feminist analyses within Community Psychology (Bond, Hill, Mulvey, & Terenzio, 2000; Mulvey, 1988), and the absence of research that examines queer sex from a non-assimilative standpoint (Kitzinger, 2004).

### **Study Limitations**

A limitation to the use of qualitative methods in this study is its lack of generalizeability. It is clear that my sample is not representative of all women who have sex with women: most of the participants were White, most had post-secondary education or were still in high school, most identified as queer or pansexual, all were born in Canada, and none identified as trans women. The experience of multiple forms of marginality changes how all forms of oppression are

experienced, and thus the experiences of (hetero)sexism by this sample cannot be used to represent those of other women. While efforts were made to include more women of colour and/or newcomer women in the study, there were barriers to their participation, including potentially higher levels of stigma regarding same-gender sex and lack of sexual identification as QPBL (Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004). Many participants in the study were referred by friends, and thus reflected a particular social network. Further, being a postgraduate student with a theoretical conceptualization of sexuality, the manner in which I frame and discuss the project may have resonated more for women who have undergone university education, and may have alienated those who have not. The absence of participants who were transgender and/or two-spirited was also a limit of this study: the experience of marginalization on the basis of gender identity is likely to impact the experience of (hetero)sexism.

A further limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on young women: the experiences of older women are likely to be quite different, given the many recent societal changes regarding QPBL individuals, including the removal of “homosexuality” as a psychological disorder from the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual, the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada, and the increasing representation of QPBL individuals and characters in the mass media. Aspects of the development of an understanding of sex and having early sexual experiences with women prior to these changes would likely reflect the experience of greater social marginalization. Further, understanding generational differences between older women and younger women who have sex with women, and the resulting effect on communities of QPBL women, would require further investigation.

### **Implications for Policy, Frontline Practice and Theory**

This study has implications for feminist theory and for sexual health policy. The findings of this study support intersectional understandings of agency, showing that dichotomous understandings of marginalization and agency (where an individual is either a victim or an active agent) do not represent the complexity of the experiences of people who are marginalized, particularly those who are multiply marginalized. Further, this study adds complexity to the understanding of agency in the form of perception of resistance: the conceptualization of sexual identity as more visible and active and thus resistance to (hetero)sexist society, while the conceptualization of sex between women as private, and done for personal reasons and thus not as much an act of resistance demonstrates the complexity of conceptualization of agency by the women within this study. The discussion of resistance being both put upon non-heterosexual sexual identities and also actively taken up by QPBL women supported Foucauldian ideas of power both creating and sculpting the possibility of resistance, while again highlighting the complex manner in which women conceptualized their experience of marginalization and agency. This study also reinforces the many calls (e.g., Bolso, 2008; Hite, 1976; Hite, 2008; Iasenza, 2008; Koedt, 1996; Rich, 1980) for a need for a new understanding of sex, and the need to move towards dominant sex scripts that value the desires and experiences of women, particularly women who have sex with women.

The findings of this study also have relevance to sexual health practice, particularly the design and provision of sexual health services and sexual health education. The fear and anxiety associated by participants with first sex with a woman highlights the need for more information about sex between women, including safer sex, presented in formats that are destigmatizing and normalizing. While still more information about safer sex between women is necessary, it is clear that information that is known is not being adequately transferred to women. Further, as



many participants had identified as heterosexual and had felt represented in the (hetero)sexist sex education they received, broader sexual health information encompassing sex between women and sex between men should be provided to all individuals, regardless of current sexual identification.

Additionally, as many participants seemed to associate safer sex between women as the use of dental dams (which they generally did not use), a broader discourse about safer sex between women needs to occur, including the need for regular STI testing and pap smears, and broader representation of safer sex information that highlights and explain methods of reducing risk without shaming individuals for choosing to engage in higher risk behaviours.

Finally, as negotiation of sexual desire and sexual identification was very complex for many participants, this degree of dynamics should be reflected in how health care workers discuss and portray sexuality. In particular, the differences in sexual behaviors of individuals with the same identity further stresses the need to focus on sexual history and current sexual behaviour when discussing health needs, without delegitimizing sexual identification.

### **Future research**

Further research with women who have sex with women should be done with a broader sample of women: gaining the perspectives of multiply marginalized women, including women with disabilities, women of colour, newcomer women, trans women, and working class women would greatly increase the richness of information. Further, interviewing more women who identify as lesbian and as heterosexual would also give different perspectives on these complex issues. Research with older women would shed important light on cultural changes regarding representation/discussion of sex between women and QPBL sexualities.

A similar study with men who have sex with men would also shed more light on differences in experiences of (hetero)sexism by women who have sex with women and men who have sex with men, particularly regarding the centrality of men to sex scripts. In this study, some statements by participants suggested that there is a clearer sex script for sex between men: participants primarily conceptualized sex between men as anal sex. However, as anal sex is not the most common sexual act for men who have sex with men, it would be interesting to examine the experience of having a more clear sex script, but one that does not represent the kinds of sex most often had.

Further research on safer sex in sex between women was desired by several of the participants. While there are some studies of safer sex behaviours (e.g., Richters, Bergin, Lubowitz, & Prestage, 2002; Stevens, 1994), further investigation of safer sex knowledge, accessibility of resources, and practices would be necessary, as participants highlighted all three of these areas as barriers. Investigation of the gap between knowledge and behaviour, discussed by several participants in relation to the use of dental dams, would be useful.

The gap between sexual desire and sexual behaviour regarding sex with men would also be useful to investigate more fully, particularly in relation to recent findings showing LGBTQ youth to be more likely than straight youth to be involved in a pregnancy (Flicker, Flynn, Larkin, Travers, Guta, Pole, & Layne, 2009; Saewyc, Poon, Homma, & Skay, 2008.)

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Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term “(hetero)sexist” combines both “heterosexist” and “sexist” in order to highlight the interconnection of these forms of oppression for QPBL women, and to minimize repetition.

<sup>2</sup> The term “cisgender” refers to individuals whose gender identity is the same as the gender they were assigned at birth (Serano, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> BDSM refers to Bondage & Domination, Domination & Submission, and Sadism & Masochism.

<sup>4</sup> In the studies McNair (2005) cites, tribadism is defined as “genital rubbing by any part of the other woman’s body, often the thighs, legs, or trunk” (p. 213).

## Appendix A: Interview Guide

### How Women Build Understanding of Sex Within Cultural Silence

When did you first learn what sex was? How? From whom? Do you remember what your initial thoughts were? Or what key messages were being given to you?

Prompt: Did you think that sex was something only men and women did together? When did you first realize it wasn't?

Prompt: Tell me about sex ed in school. What did they say about non-heterosexual sex? How did that make you feel?

Did you talk about sex with your friends growing up? What kinds of things did you talk about?

Prompt: Was it mostly about sex with men?

Prompt: Do you talk about sex with your friends now? What kinds of things do you talk about now?

Prompt: How has it changed? Is it now mostly about sex with women? Why has it changed?

When you think about what sex is to you right now, how did you come to that understanding?

Prompt: How did you come to an understanding of what good sex was going to be for you?

Do you think there is adequate discussion about how women have sex with women?

Prompt: Do you think there is a culture of silence about how women have sex?

Prompt: What was it like to develop your understanding of sex within that silence?

Prompt: Do you think that this silence about how women have sex with women had any benefits for you?

### Sex Between Women

Tell me about the first time you had sex with a woman.

Prompt: Was it different than what you expected? How?

Prompt: If you've had sex with men as well, how were your first times different? Was one more significant? Why?

When you think of sex between women, what kinds of things do you think of?

Prompt: How does it make you feel?

Prompt: When you think of sex between a woman and a man, what kinds of things do you think of?

What do you think is unique about sex between two women?

### Sex as Resistance

Have you felt that messages we get as women about sexual pleasure are different than those men get? How are they different?

Prompt: Do you think that it's easier to reject these messages about sexual pleasure when you're having sex with a woman? Why?

How important is your sexual pleasure to you?

Prompt: How important is your partner's pleasure to you?

Prompt: Have you ever felt like you were having sex for your partner, rather than having sex for yourself? What were you thinking while you were having sex?

Prompt: Have you ever felt like your partner's sexual pleasure was more important than yours?

Do you think that it's important for both sexual partners to be equally enjoying sex?

Prompt: Do you think it's easy to have equal pleasure with your partners? Why?

Have you ever thought that there's a right way and a wrong way to have sex?

Prompt: Have you ever worried about having sex the right way?

Prompt: Did that change after you started having sex? How? Why?

Do you ever feel like sex is a performance? Who are you performing for?

Prompt: Does this ever make you feel disconnected from sex/ your partner?

Some women see sex between women as a form of resistance to the dominant heterosexual norm. What do you think about that? Does that connect to how you think of sex?

### Sexual Identity

How do you define your sexual orientation?

Why do identify yourself that way?

Is your sexual identity an import aspect of yourself? Why?

Prompt: (if L, Q, B) Why is it important to use the word (lesbian, bisexual, queer)?

Prompt: (if L, Q, B) Do you see your identity as a way of resisting what society tells you to be?

Prompt: (if no identity) Why do you not identify your sexuality?

Prompt: (if straight/ no identity and individualizes sexual identity) Some women I spoke with who identified as lesbians told me that their identity as a lesbian was important, as it was a way of telling the world that they are living in a different way. What do you think about that?

**Appendix B: Informed Consent Statement: Individual Interviews**



**Reconstructing Sex:  
Women Having Sex with Women**

**Wilfrid Laurier Informed Consent Statement**

**Researchers:**

- Alix Holtby, MA Candidate, Community Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519 884 0710 x 3950 , [holt1080@wlu.ca](mailto:holt1080@wlu.ca)
- Dr. Robb Travers, Assistant Professor, Community Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519.884.0710x 2577, [rtravers@wlu.ca](mailto:rtravers@wlu.ca)

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this research is to learn about the experiences and beliefs of women who have sex with women. As little information exists at a cultural level regarding the sex that women have sex with each other, we're interested in how women form an understanding of their own sexuality and what sex means to them, and what your experiences and opinions are regarding sex between women.

**Information:**

The research will involve you sharing your experiences and thoughts about your sexuality and sexual experiences. The interview will take about 1-1.5 hours of your time and will take place in Planned Parenthood or at the University of Toronto. You can choose the level at which you are comfortable participating (e.g., you can choose to not answer some questions). Before the interview begins, you will be asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire which will take approximately 5 minutes.. You can withdraw from the study at any time. Approximately 10-15 women of age 18-30 will be interviewed for this study between August and October 2009. Interviews will be one-on-one with Alix Holtby. These sessions must be audio recorded, and quotes from these sessions may be used in publications. These quotes may include information from the demographic questionnaire. Once all the interviews have been completed, there will be a discussion session of 1-1.5 hours duration where the results from the interviews will be discussed. This session will occur in November, 2009. All participants will be invited to this discussion. Your participation in that session is also completely voluntary.

**Benefits:**

Your voice is important! This interview gives you the opportunity to discuss and reflect on your sexuality and your sexual experiences in a meaningful way.

**Compensation:**

In appreciation for your participation in the study, you will be provided with an honoraria of 10\$ each for the interview and the discussion session, for a total of 20\$.

**Risks:**

We do not believe that you will experience any major risks to your well-being by participating in the interview. It is possible that in discussing your sexuality and your sexual experiences, you may become upset recalling your experiences. If an interview causes you to become upset, we can take a break, postpone, or end the interview. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and can choose to not answer any question you are uncomfortable with. If you decide to withdraw from the study after the interview has started, you will still receive the 10\$ compensation.

**Confidentiality:**

All information you share in the interview is confidential. Only I will hear the tapes of your interview and the discussion session, and will be the only person to transcribe these tapes. However, due to the small sample size and the nature of focus groups, your confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. I will digitally record the interview to make sure all of the information you share with me is saved: later, I will transcribe this recording. Once a recording is transcribed, the recording will be deleted by Alix Holtby. The electronic transcripts will be password protected and saved on a password protected computer at my office. Only my supervisor, Robb Travers, and I will have access to these transcripts. The transcribed data will be kept for 5 years following publication of my thesis, and will be deleted by Robb Travers by January 2016. The consent form will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in Robb Travers' office for 5 years following publication; it will be shredded by Robb Travers by January 2016.

**Participation:**

Your participation in this study is purely voluntary and you have the right to decide that you do not want to take part in the research without penalty or loss of any benefits. You can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. If you withdraw from the study, we will not transcribe any of your responses to the interview. Your forms will be shredded, and the file of your interview will be deleted. You also have the right to omit or withdraw your response to any question: if you so choose, we will skip that question, or your response will not be transcribed. If you decide to withdraw from the study after the interview has started, you will still receive the 10\$ compensation.

**Publication of Findings:**

The results of this study will be used in the researcher's Master's thesis. Results from the study may be published in academic journals. A summary of the research will likely be posted on Planned Parenthood Toronto's website under the TEACH banner.

**Feedback:**

A summary of the study will be posted on Planned Parenthood's website by April 30, 2010. Hard copies of this summary will also be available at Planned Parenthood's office at this time. A copy of this summary can also be emailed to, if you are interested.

**Contact:**

If you any questions about the study, or if you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher, Alix Holtby, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 519-884-1970, ext. 3950 or [holt1080@wlu.ca](mailto:holt1080@wlu.ca) or her supervisor, Dr. Robb Travers, at Wilfrid Laurier Univeristy 519.884.0710x 2577or [rtravers@wlu.ca](mailto:rtravers@wlu.ca) .

**Ethics Approval:**

This project has been reviewed and approved by Laurier's University Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact. Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519 884-0710, extension 5225, [rbasso@wlu.ca](mailto:rbasso@wlu.ca)

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have received a copy of the INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT. I have read it or had it read to me and understand it. It describes my involvement in the research and the information to be collected from me. I understand the interview and discussion session will be audio recorded. I understand and agree that quotes of what I say may appear in published reports or presentations, but only in an anonymous form, so that I cannot be identified as the source of these quotes. I understand that my quotes may be used in publications without my name, but with my demographic information as collected on the demographic questionnaire (e.g., age, racial background, sexual orientation).

I agree to participate in the individual interview for this research.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to be contacted in October 2009 to participate in the discussion session

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

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

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to have a copy of the final research summary sent to me.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

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



Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Site researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**LGBTQ Health and Rape Crisis Resources: Toronto**

**The 519 Church Street Community Centre**

519 Church Street  
Toronto, ON: M4Y 2C9  
Tel: 416-392-6874  
Email: [info@the519.org](mailto:info@the519.org)  
Web: <http://www.the519.org/>

**Sherbourne Health Centre**

333 Sherbourne St 2nd Floor  
Toronto, ON: M5A 2S5  
Tel: 416-324-4109  
Email: [info@sherbourne.on.ca](mailto:info@sherbourne.on.ca)  
Web: <http://www.sherbourne.on.ca/>

**2-Spirited People of the First Nations**

593 Yonge Street, Suite 202  
Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1Z4  
Tel: 416-944-9300  
Email: [Lesley@2spirits.com](mailto:Lesley@2spirits.com)  
Web: <http://www.2spirits.com/>


**Lesbian, Bi, Gay, Trans YOUTHLINE**

Tel: 1-800-268-9688  
Web: <http://www.youthline.ca/where.html>

**Toronto Rape Crisis Centre / Multicultural Women Against Rape**

Crisis Line: (416) 597-8808 (24 hrs/day)  
Phone: (416) 597-1171  
Email: [info@trccmwar.ca](mailto:info@trccmwar.ca) (Answered Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)  
Website: [www.trccmwar.ca](http://www.trccmwar.ca)

**Sexual Assault Care Centre**

The Scarborough Hospital, Birchmount Campus  
3030 Birchmount Road  
Scarborough, Ontario  
416-495-2555 TTY: 416-498-6739  
 [email@sacc.to](mailto:email@sacc.to)

### Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire

Participant Number \_\_\_\_\_

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Are you...? (Please check all that apply)

Female

Male

Other (Please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Are you also?

Transgender

Two spirited

3. What are the first three digits of your postal code?

The first three digits of my postal code are \_\_\_\_\_

I don't know my postal code

I don't have a postal code

4. Were you born in Canada?

Yes

No: Please tell us what country you were born in: \_\_\_\_\_

5. How long have you been living in Canada?

I have lived here all or most of my life

I have been living in Canada for 10 years or more

I have been living in Canada between 4 and 9 years

I have been living in Canada between 1 year and 3 years

I have been living in Canada less than 1 year

6. Where were your parents born?

Mother:  Canada  Elsewhere (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

I don't know

Father:  Canada  Elsewhere (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

I don't know

7. Which of the following best reflects your racial background? (Please check all that apply)

Aboriginal

Asian-East (e.g., China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan)

Asian-South (e.g., India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan)

Asian-South East (e.g., Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines)

Black- Africa (e.g., Ghana, Kenya, Somalia)

Black-Canadian

Black-Caribbean (e.g., Jamaica, Barbados)

- Latin America (e.g., Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua)  
 Indian-Caribbean (e.g., Guyanese with origins in India)  
 Middle Eastern (e.g., Egypt, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia)  
 White- Canadian  
 White- European (e.g., England, Greece, Sweden, Russia)  
 Mixed Background  
 Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other(s)  
 Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## 8. Are you...? (please check all that apply)

- Aboriginal/First Nations Spirituality  
 Agnostic  
 Anglican  
 Atheist  
 Baptist  
 B'hai  
 Buddhist  
 Catholic  
 Hindu  
 Jewish  
 Lutheran  
 Muslim  
 Protestant Christian  
 Sikh  
 United  
 No religion  
 Religion Spirituality not listed here  
 Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## 9. What is your sexual orientation? (Please check all that apply)

- Lesbian  
 Two-Spirit  
 Pansexual  
 Gay  
 Bisexual  
 Queer  
 Not sure or questioning  
 Straight or heterosexual  
 Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

## 10. What level of education have you completed?

- Elementary School  
 Some high school  
 High school diploma or GED

- Some college/university
- University degree
- College degree
- Professional school (eg med school, law degree)
- Some post graduate school
- Post graduate degree
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix D: Recruitment Email**

Are you a woman who has had sex with women? If you're between 18-30, whether you identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, straight, or if you do not identify your sexuality, we'd like to talk to you! Both cis and trans women are welcome to participate. We're looking to talk to 10-15 women.

There is so much cultural information about how women are supposed to have sex with men, but very little information about how women have sex with each other. We're interested in how you form an understanding of sex for themselves within that context, what sex means to you, and what your experiences and opinions are of sex between women. These questions will be explored through an individual interview with Alix Holtby, an MA student at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Interviews will take approximately an hour: you'll be provided with a 10\$ honorarium for participating. You'll also be invited to take part in a 1-1.5 hour long discussion session in November: you will also be compensated 10\$ for participation in this session.

If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions, please contact Alix Holtby at [holt1080@wlu.ca](mailto:holt1080@wlu.ca). I'll then email you back to answer your questions and to set up a time for an interview. Participation in the study as well as any information you share will be held confidential.

**Appendix E: Informed Consent Statement: Discussion Group**



**Reconstructing Sex:  
Women Having Sex with Women**

**Wilfrid Laurier Informed Consent Statement**

**Researchers:**

- Alix Holtby, MA Candidate, Community Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519 884 0710 x 3950 , [holt1080@wlu.ca](mailto:holt1080@wlu.ca)
- Dr. Robb Travers, Assistant Professor, Community Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519.884.0710x 2577, [rtravers@wlu.ca](mailto:rtravers@wlu.ca)

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this research is to learn about the experiences and beliefs of women who have sex with women. As little information exists at a cultural level regarding the sex that women have sex with each other, we're interested in how women form an understanding of their own sexuality and what sex means to them, and what your experiences and opinions are regarding sex between women

**Information:**

The research will involve you sharing your experiences and thoughts about your sexuality and sexual experiences. Approximately 10-15 women of age 18-30 will have been interviewed for this study between August and October 2009. All participants have been invited to this discussion session, where major themes from the interviews will be discussed with participants. The discussion session will be facilitated by Alix Holtby, will last 1-1.5 hours and will take place in Planned Parenthood or at the University of Toronto. The session must be audio recorded, and quotes from this session may be used in publications. These quotes may include information from your demographic questionnaire. You can withdraw from the study at any time.

**Benefits:**

Your voice is important! This discussion session gives you the opportunity to discuss and reflect on your sexuality and your sexual experiences in a meaningful way.

**Compensation:**

In appreciation for your participation in the study, you will be provided with an honorarium of 10\$ for the discussion session.

**Risks:**

We do not believe that you will experience any major risks to your well-being by participating in the discussion session. It is possible that in discussing your sexuality and your sexual experiences, you may become upset recalling your experiences. If the session causes you to become upset, you can take a break, or withdraw from the discussion session. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and can choose to not answer any question you are uncomfortable with. If you decide to withdraw from the study after the discussion session has started, you will still receive the 10\$ compensation.

**Confidentiality:**

All information you share in the discussion session is confidential. Only I will hear the tapes of the discussion session, and will be the only person to transcribe these tapes. However, due to the small sample size and the nature of focus groups, your confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. I will digitally record the session to make sure all of the information you share with me is saved: later, I will transcribe this recording. Once a recording is transcribed, the recording will be deleted by Alix Holtby. The electronic transcripts will be password protected and saved on a password protected computer at my office. Only my supervisor, Dr. Robb Travers, and I will have access to these transcripts. The transcribed data will be kept for 5 years following publication of my thesis, and will be deleted by Dr. Robb Travers by January 2016. The consent form will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in Robb Travers' office for 5 years following publication; it will be shredded by Robb Travers by January 2016.

**Participation:**

Your participation in this study is purely voluntary and you have the right to decide that you do not want to take part in the research without penalty or loss of any benefits. You can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. You have the right to omit your response to any question. If you decide to withdraw from the study after the discussion session has started, you will still receive the 10\$ compensation.

**Publication of Findings:**

The results of this study will be used in the researcher's Master's thesis. Results from the study may be published in academic journals. A summary of the research will likely be posted on Planned Parenthood Toronto's website under the TEACH banner.

**Feedback:**

A summary of the study will be posted on Planned Parenthood Toronto's website by April 30, 2010. Hard copies of this summary will also be available at Planned Parenthood's office at this time. A copy of this summary can also be emailed to, if you are interested.

**Contact:**

If you any questions about the study, or if you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher, Alix Holtby, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 519-884-1970, ext. 3950 or [holt1080@wlu.ca](mailto:holt1080@wlu.ca) or her supervisor, Dr. Robb Travers, at Wilfrid Laurier University 519.884.0710x 2577 or [rtravers@wlu.ca](mailto:rtravers@wlu.ca), .



**Ethics Approval:**

This project has been reviewed and approved by Laurier's University Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact. Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519 884-0710, extension 5225, [rbasso@wlu.ca](mailto:rbasso@wlu.ca)

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have received a copy of the INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT. I have read it or had it read to me and understand it. It describes my involvement in the research and the information to be collected from me. I understand the discussion session will be audio recorded. I understand and agree that quotes of what I say may appear in published reports or presentations, but only in an anonymous form, so that I cannot be identified as the source of these quotes. I understand that my quotes may be used in publications without my name, but with my demographic information as collected on the demographic questionnaire (e.g., age, racial background, sexual orientation).

I agree to participate in the discussion session.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to have a copy of the final research summary sent to me.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

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

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Site researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_