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QUEERING THE PRODUCTION OF SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE: NARRATIVE  
STRATEGIES, GENDER POLITICS AND THE PROMISE OF FEMINIST FOCUS GROUPS

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## Introduction

Dominant public discourses structure our interpretations of sexual acts in decidedly gendered ways, shaping our understandings of sexual experiences and embodiment. As a result, current understandings of terms such as “virginity” evoke cultural standards of womanhood, whiteness, monogamy, and tradition that both reflect and reinforce contemporary society’s hetero-patriarchal relations of power. The narratives available for girls and women to make sense of the first sexual experiences are policed by dominant sexual discourses that privilege male pleasure (Kozma, 56-59), which can limit the narratives of actual sexual experiences and subordinate gynogentic discourses of sexual knowing (Medley-Rath 26). Adrienne Rich said that “a politicized life out to sharpen both the senses and the memory” (454) a sentiment that frames my project as a place for the production of embodied truth through memories.

In the absence of public discourses or formal, institutionalized sex-positive education opportunities based on the bodies, experiences, or perceptions of cis-girls and women, this project examines the ways that women tell their sexual stories and the implications of their narrative strategies. It positions storytelling as a subversive, transformative space for girls to make sense of and affirm their experiences of sexual embodiment. In light of compelling evidence that engaging in “impression management” strategy (Goffman) within friend groups is psychologically and emotionally harmful to young women (Rudman), this project examines how women and girls navigate dominant cultural scripts to better understand sexual behaviors, experiences, and identities. Drawing on queer, feminist, and symbolic interactionist frameworks, I “call attention to the partiality, fluidity, and situatedness of knowledge” (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 177). I explore how women accumulate and exchange sexual knowledge and ultimately become sexual bodies through my positioning as a peer researcher in the focus groups. Analysis

of the narratives women constructed to tell “sexual stories” (Plummer) in the context of focus group interviews reveals key ways in which women navigated the cultural and political terrain of sexual corporeality, most notably through bodily boundary work and interactional and embodied gatekeeping strategies within friend groups. This kind of analysis humanizes and has “fostered the development of communities of action” (Riessman 3).

### **Lit Review**

In this section of this paper, I highlight some of the relevant scholarly work on female sexualities and sociological theory; my paper expands on the narrative turn in the social sciences and humanities. Dominant discourses of the 1990s largely silenced female pleasure as a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry, and pre-empted a shift in scholarship to researching female sexual behavior “on its own terms” instead of in opposition to male sexuality (Somers 609). While a plethora of literature exists on the occurrence of virginity loss, fewer studies examine how women and girls experience the first sex, or the subsequent emotional responses and implications thereof (Higgins et al.). My paper contributes to scholarship in this area by providing a qualitative analysis of the “sexual stories” (Plummer) that young women tell in focus groups, exposing the ways that dominant discourses of sexual knowing drive the narrative strategies of these young women.

The study of female sexuality has emerged in the last several decades in broader field of scholarship that includes sociology and feminist and queer studies (Foucault, D’Emilio). Queer histories of sexuality chart how “sexuality” has been created by discourse (Brickell, 416). The study of female sexuality has emerged in the last several decades in broader field of scholarship that includes sociology and women’s studies (Foucault; D’Emilio & Freedman). Histories of sexuality chart how “sexuality” has been created by discourse (Brickell 416). Scholars have often

simplified discourses of sex and equated them with sexual repression. Michel Foucault, one of the seminal theorists in the field, claims that discourse creates subjects out of “multiple forces, energies, matters, desires, and thoughts” (28 “Society Must Be Defended”). He maps out the explosion of discourse about sex “capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy” (23 “The History of Sexuality”).

Discourse, as Foucault uses it, refers to the ways that we make meaning out of the world and that people create meanings for and on us. Foucault’s analysis of the “repressive hypothesis” challenged “official” histories that claim sexuality was repressed during the 19th century, arguing that the repression of sexual actually led to an “incitement to discourse” on sexuality, the particular forms of which erupted from the contexts of biopolitical power configured at the time. Foucault theorized biopower as the right of the sovereign to “‘make’ life and ‘let’ die” (241 “Society Must Not Be Defended”). Both overt violence and discourse create and enforce mechanisms that determine which lives are supported by the “state”, and which are left to “let die”. In the context of this project, these biopolitical discourses control “objects of knowledge” and reinforce, among other techniques, gender essentialism and monogamy as a way to justify capitalism (243 “Society Must Not Be Defended”). In doing so, the sexually perverse subject is created and regulated.

Current literature on discourse emphasizes the ways that “we constitute our social identities” through narrative practices (Somers 606). Research suggests that methodologies that “privileges positionality and subjectivity” more authentically engage these narratives (Riessman 3). Specifically, storytelling engages directly in negotiations of self in order to “act” successfully within the context of a narrative and interest the audience (Riessman 5; Langellier). One study found that people express their preferred identities as part of the social interaction between

storyteller and listener (Langellier). Below, I argue that, as “impression management” strategies (Goffman), the careful strategies people employ to control public perception, can help us understand the how people engage in and create different presentations of self in changing contexts (i.e. from high school to college). Through a narrative analytic framework, I focus on these presentations of self emerge through women’s narrative construction of sexual learning and development in the context of storytelling. The narrative turn references a turn across a variety of academic disciplines that have “embraced the narrative metaphor” (Riessman 2).

In doing so, researchers in political science, sociology, and other disciplines have taken up storytelling as an important site for systematic inquiry. Because narrative analysis can refer to looking at life story, small narratives, disruptive life events and more, the genre is wide reaching and interpreted differently across disciplines (Riessman 5; Myerhoff).

Dominant public discourses structure our interpretations of sexual acts, shaping what it means to “lose your virginity”. The term “virginity” implies standards of womanhood, whiteness, monogamy, and tradition that can limit the narratives of actual sexual experiences and thus reinforces limited discourses of sexual knowing (Medley-Rath 26). Increased interest in female sexuality across disciplines has sparked projects that examine girls’ transition to womanhood by examining narratives of virginity loss (Holland et al., "Deconstructing Virginity - Young People's Accounts of First Sex."; Sprecher; Carpenter "The Ambiguity of “having Sex”: The Subjective Experience of Virginity Loss in the United States"). Beginning with Thompson’s paper on teenage girls’ sexual initiation, researchers looked at how women’s pleasure and sense of self is compromised in the first sex act (Thompson 341). Thompson explains how “issues as diverse as teenage pregnancy, sex education, and the presentation of sexual behavior in the media” affect the experience of the first sexual experience for women. Following Thompson’s

work, Laura Carpenter conducted in depth case studies with over 60 people ages 18 to 34 to talk about their definitions of sex and what it meant for them to lose their virginity ("The Ambiguity of "having Sex": The Subjective Experience of Virginity Loss in the United States"). For Carpenter, virginity loss operates as a transition, "or status passages" for both women and men. However, men have generally more positive first sexual experiences than women do (Sprecher 471; Beres & Farvid 390). Although media representations of sexuality often demonstrate increased access to pleasure for women, a variety of recent literature supports the claim that men are active sexual subjects and women are passive recipients (Wagner 307; Mellor 450).

According to mainstream media, women are expected to be conventionally feminine, dismissive and focused on male pleasing during their first sexual experiences, at the expense of their own pleasure (Holland et al., 222, "Deconstructing Virginity - Young People's Accounts of First Sex"; Lorde 87- 90; Baumeister). This lack of sexual power shapes the first sexual act, our memories of it and how we choose to retell the experience (Holland et al., 231 *ibid*; Carpenter 133 "The Ambiguity of "having Sex": The Subjective Experience of Virginity Loss in the United States"). The conflicting affective response between losing ones' "virginity" and how one feels about this experience shows the pervasiveness of popular sexual discourses distort sexual experiences and the ability for women to discuss them freely (Stimpson 260-262). Kenneth Plummer states that sexual stories not only display sexual truths, but they create those truths and thus should be "investigated in their own right" (5). Storytelling reveals distorted memories, and leads to "generic storytelling," in which individuals do not express specific aspects of the experience in favor of a larger social commentary. In this way, narratives provide valuable insight into structures and discourses. Catherine Riessman suggests that the "personal troubles"

(be it sexual or otherwise) that participants disclose in their narratives, are indicative of broader social and cultural processes.

Current research in narrative analysis also emphasizes how the “self” is constructed in opposition to the “Other” as a discursive tactic (Bamberg 2010; Holloway; Holloway & Jefferson). I use this to unpack the ways that participants in my focus groups self police via narrative strategies. Discourses of loss, gain, and power operate within heterosexual power structures (Caron & Hinman, 525-530; “Deconstructing Virginity”; Holland et al. 223; Schippers 90-97; Holland, Ramazanoglu & Thompson). This research provides a useful starting point for examining the ways that women use narrative strategies when disclosing sexual experience to negotiate the aforementioned discourses. I demonstrate how socialized understandings of female sexuality shape both their retelling and performance of sex and sexuality in the context of their friend groups, as told within the focus groups.

As relational concepts, hegemonic views of femininity and masculinity emphasize “heterosexual-desire” and desire as core expectations of femininity (Schippers 92). This ultimately stigmatizes aggression and sexual prowess in women and creates a policing discourse of sexual norms for women to navigate (Connell; Sprecher & Reagan). Popular media representations produce cultural scripts of femininity that shape the policing tactics that women use both within and around heterosexual relationships. (Holland et al. 222-224, “Deconstructing Virginity”). While some research explores the ways that gendered power shapes the narrative construction of virginity and the first sexual experiences, but I look further at the specific narrative strategies used to negotiate these discourses through storytelling (Holland et al., *ibid*; Carpenter "The Ambiguity of “having Sex”: The Subjective Experience of Virginity Loss in the United States.") Berger & Wegner; Ericksen; Stewart; Miles). Most of this literature is drawn



from quantitative studies that were initially part of national AIDS focused surveys. Out of this, select research draws on personal narratives to humanize and ground women's experiences (Holland et al., *ibid*; Kippax, Crawford, Waldby & Benton; Stewart). Nevertheless, these studies and others successfully highlight how policing sexual discourses shape both the lived sexual experience for these women during their sexual debut, and their negotiation of sexual experiences later on (Kelly 79-83; Carpenter 96-97 "Sexual Satisfaction"; Ashcraft 329-330; Carpenter, 805-806 "Virginity Loss in Reel/Real Life"; Carpenter 127-129 "The Ambiguity of Having Sex"; Humphreys 665-668).

Symbolic interactionism, as theorized by George Mead, avows that meanings are created and enforced in a specific time and space, by participants in any given society based on dominant discourses (Plummer). Essentially, this literature claims that we are a product of our context, and subsequently reproduce dominant meanings. Symbolic interactionism helps deconstruct the ways that individuals present their sexual selves in specific contexts. George Mead theorizes that, using theories of symbolic-interactionism, the "self" of a person can be understood in two parts. The first is created through interactions with people, the environment, and knowledge. Mead calls this the "me". He theorizes the other part of the "self" as "I", the active self (Mead). "Significant others" are the people who are most instrumental in the development of a person (family etc.) while the "generalized other" refers to the attitudes, lessons, expectations, and norms of a society that shape the formation of the "me". This "generalized other" provides and enforces discourse beyond the first intimate tier of friends and family. In this paper, the "generalized other" refers to *Cosmopolitan* and both informal and formal sexual educations and can be used to unpack how broad sexual discourses become available to these participants.

Additionally, participants' friend groups police and inform each other based on Mead's concept of "significant others" as a foundational part of both self-development and the development of discourse (Mead "Mind, Self, and Society"). Wagner, for instance, examined the pervasive implications of "modern gender inequalities and the persistence of romantic monogamous love" on strategies of self-making during intimacy (Wagner 307). Additionally, she found that individuals feel like they engage with social norms with their own free will "even though they often exist within societal boundaries" (Wagner 292).

A contextual analysis is particularly relevant for scholars examining women negotiating changing norms between high school and college. Chris Brickell's "A Symbolic Interactionist History of Sexuality?" gives a history of the body of theory and asserts that we construct our reality within "multiple 'interaction orders' (Goffman). Brickell writes that we interact with those around us to gauge the social norms of a specific situation (417), a claim that I use to unpack women's discomfort in their friend groups and to investigate the interactional potential for feminist focus groups.

More recent research attests to the power of hegemonic patriarchal discourses in shaping the ways that women construct their sexual identities and experiences. Holland et al., pursue this concept further and look at how power shapes the possibility of pleasure for women. They found that women defined their sexual practices and pleasure in relation to the men they were acting with, instead of identifying their own sexualities (Holland et al., 273). Holland et al. used unstructured interviews to talk to participants about their sexual activity so that these women could control the discussion and "define their own pleasure and sex". This intentionally pushed these participants to create their own definition of the first act, ultimately imploring their own words in the scholarship so not to muddle intention through translation (Holland et al., 273-279

ibid). This engagement with narrative analysis preempts my project and drove me to use women's own words in my analysis.

While some literature has explored women's impression management strategies in college, there is limited work looking at how these strategies manifest in storytelling. Erving Goffman's theory of impression management has been used to explore how people present versions of themselves to appease the interests of those around them. Limited scholarship explores the psychological and social implications of impression management strategies. One paper that examined the implications of "silencing the self" on the psychological well-being of college women found that women who feel "pressure to present as perfect" are more likely to feel silenced and experience conflict in their relationships (Schrick, Sharp, Zvonkovic and Reifman).

Women's peer groups are sites of potentially intimate and healthy conversations and identity formation (Adler & Adler, Armstrong & Riessing). However, one paper found that women felt pressured to be sexual active in order to be in line with norms in the friend group (Cooper & Gordon, 2015 75). Similarly, in their study of American college students, Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) found that women negotiate expectations of casual sex, in college, while managing norms of appropriate promiscuity among their friends (Hamilton & Armstrong). Relevant scholarship has emphasized the significant role that friends have in creating and maintaining "quality" romantic and sexual relationships (Harper et al., 351).

In stark contrast... Consciousness raising groups have been found to have positive psychological, social and political effects (Joel & Yarimi; Brodsky; Israeli & Santor; Kravetz). Consciousness raising was first introduced in literature in the 1960's as part of second wave feminist movement, in which women shared personal stories... in an effort to "decrease isolation

and increase interactions" between women (Brodsky). As consciousness raising sites, feminist focus groups are not only sites for the collection of rich data, but also spaces that facilitate dialogue and "help women overcome their structural isolation" (Mies; Callahan), validate women's experiences, and create spaces of trust (Brodsky). The following section discusses the feminist methodologies used for this research project, and addresses how this project's methods evolved over this semester. I outline the qualitative methods that I used, and how they address issues of power, reflexivity and reflect the narrative turn in the social sciences and humanities.

### **Methodology**

Feminist studies is a reflexive interdisciplinary field that draws on critical qualitative and quantitative research methodologies and attends to the complex interactions between feminist theories and methods. The feminist project has been understood as a dual proposition between the Academy and transformative political action (Wiegman 41) although some scholars argue that the focus on political action in the discipline delegitimizes the field as an academic one in its own right (Wiegman; Brown)

Reflexivity is a central point of feminisms, both in the field and in the Academy, and can be described most clearly as: "all knowing is subjective" (Hufford 294). At the core, reflexivity requires the researcher to consider their position of power throughout the research process, and reflect on how their own membership in social groups affects the outcome of the work in question (Jorgenson 115). The reactions of interviewees to the researcher are important, creating space for "participants' understandings... to enter the circle of interpretation" (Jorgenson 118). I used this to inform my focus groups and the semi structured follow up interviews.

I conducted focus groups as my primary method of data collection. In order to be reflexive in my methods, I emphasized "collective discussion" throughout my focus groups

(Frith 283). Frith highlights key advantages to using focus groups as an interactive research method in sex research. The first is that focus groups are able to collect untapped information because the conversation is directed by participants, and not limited to the questions that researchers come up with in surveys. Additionally, focus groups allow the researcher to become familiar with the participant's colloquial vocabulary. This helps the researcher frame any subsequent questions that arise, and observe how language is operating within their social contexts. Finally, focus groups provide a space for meaningful disclosure by participants through the potential for shared experiences within groups, and the opportunity to build off of each other's stories (Frith; Wilkinson). Despite apparent issues with privacy and confidentiality in a group setting, focus groups actually allow for more disclosure around sensitive issues because "disclosure from one member of the group may encourage others to follow suit" (Frith 283) and allow participants to relate their stories to other members of the group. I interpret this participant interaction as consciousness raising (Frith 284).

With these advantages in mind, I conducted five focus groups with Colby students, focusing on early sexual experiences and sexuality in general. I paid particular attention to how participants' stories reflected, challenged, or reinforced dominant sexual discourses.

These focus groups provided a space for valuable data to be collected and facilitated critical and conscious relationships between participants outside of everyday policing and surveillance. In essence, feminist principles of research explore how systems of power structure women's lives (Hawkesworth 95), which I used to inform the facilitation of my focus groups and interviews.

Focus groups provide a unique mode of data collection because they are able to facilitate interactive conversations and thus interactive data (Wilkinson 112). Interestingly, Wilkinson continues with a critique of the current qualitative scholarship on focus groups because current

work in the field doesn't engage much with the interactions between participants as side conversations. This informed my analysis of data, because in order to effectively conduct a focus group, I emphasized "the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (112). For example, one participant in a focus group said: "yeah I really enjoyed the focus group, like there aren't that many women centric spaces on this campus um so that was definitely a nice change and like I didn't know the people or know too many things about the people and it was just great to have a blank slate and be able to share with those people without feeling like I was being judged". She identified this space as a collaborative one where she could share with the other women without fear of judgment. Essentially, Wilkinson identified that there is a gap in the literature that needs to address the actual interactive narrative strategies that participants use with one another to frame their stories. She suggests that focus groups as a feminist methodology can help fill in this gap.

I draw on the works of Wilkinson and other feminist methodologists to 's article stresses the importance of locating myself as a researcher in a way that privileges the participants as the experts (Wilkinson 114; Montell 45). This location of self is part of the essential reflexivity required to "work the hyphens" (Fine) between researchers and participant.

I've found that interactions between participants have been some of the most valuable data collected from the focus groups that I conducted I've found that occurred during interactions between participants. For instance, I witnessed several occasions in which participants had their memory sparked by someone else's story. At times, I also saw participants take on the role of the researcher, asking authentic and interested follow-up questions to other participants. These interactions have "served to elicit the elaboration of responses" (Merton 555) in a totally

authentic and curious way. In fact, most of these focus groups “ran themselves” (Wilkinson). This practice allowed for participants to feel more in control of the situation and followed the feminist model of “true dialogue” (Montell 49) that made the “feminist interview a consciousness-raising experience (Wilkinson 115, Bristow & Esper 490, Montell 49). My goal in using focus groups was also to break down the imbalance of power between researcher and participants, by “working the hyphen” between self and other (Fine; Wilkinson).

My project relied on narratives about the lived experiences of the participants’ first sexual experiences. One of the ways that I addressed participants’ naming of their sexual truths was through my methods, specifically by using focus groups as a research practice that challenges “dominant disciplinary approaches to knowledge production” (Hawkesworth 93). In order to thoughtfully consider the data I collect, I located the ways that sexual knowledge is produced, so I could try to assure that my self-awareness did not fracture or influence the interviews that I held (Bhavnani 66). Donna Haraway says that a feminist researcher must be accountable, position us and be partial, and so I conducted the rest of the focus groups and interviews using those three criteria. In order to maintain a positivist epistemology, I tried to remain objective and limit my verbal and nonverbal cues that might indicate otherwise.

Follow up personal interviews are also important to this project because they allowed me to account for emotional responses, knowledge through targeted dialogue, and to follow up on potentially hidden narratives alluded to in the group setting (Maynes, Pierce & Laslett, 9). One purpose of the individual interviews was getting more contextual information about participants, especially regarding family life, social class etc. I used this information to examine the lived experience of participants while understanding “the structures and forces that influence their experience” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli 180). I use this “reflexive knowledge building” (Hesse-

Biber & Piatelli 181) in my paper as a check to make sure that I recognize how my epistemologies and ways of knowing shape the questions that I asked participants about their knowledge. Although interviews provided me with invaluable data, the importance of focus groups cannot be overlooked when studying narratives because they provide a space for “group interaction” and facilitate conversations and potential narratives that otherwise may not be revealed (Wilkinson 112-113). Narratives are continuously constructed, and thus the ways in which participants choose to exude meaning through their stories, in the context of the interview, will be paramount for understanding operations of power as a mechanism for sexual repression and memory formation (Gubrium & Holstein 116).

I conducted three individual unstructured interviews as part of the data collection in this project. Although the focus groups gave me extensive and rich data, I conducted interviews to ask follow up questions about the stories women told in the focus groups, and as a way to give these woman another physical space to discuss their stories. I conducted each interview using similar reflexive techniques as the ones I used to conduct the focus groups. Specifically, I engaged these participants in conversation-based interviews instead of using a structured question and answer model (Rodriguez 493). My hope was that by using unstructured interviewing techniques; I would get access to authentic stories from participants that will provide me with more in depth insight into the participant’s experience. Unstructured interactive interviews allow participants to be in control of the interview process, and allow me to develop rapport with participants by “come[ing] together to create a context of conversational intimacy in which participants feel comfortable telling their story” (Ramos). The purpose of unstructured interviews “is to provide guidance but to gather information about topics of phenomena that happen to be of interest to researchers and at the same time are significant events or experiences



in persons' lives" (Corbin & Morse 339). Because my research investigates how narratives of the sexual debut are reflected in storytelling techniques, it was essential to create these interviews as a space for women to share their stories and dictate the direction of the interview in whatever way they see fit. I used Dalia Rodriguez's interviewing methodologies in order to emphasize the ways that storytelling "not only exposes and subverts the dominant discourse but also serves several theoretical, pedagogical, and methodological purposes (Rodriguez 493). As a peer of these participants, I worked hard to nurture and sustain our social relationships beyond the monetary compensation in order to ethically conduct this research (Seidman 95).

One focus group stuck out in terms of its interactional potential, because the participants came together and really bonded during a discussion about their first sexual experiences, which turned into a conversation about their own experiences of sexual assault. The participants felt like they were in control of the conversation and could "introduce their own themes and concerns" (Espin 228) and so a conversation began which discussed what counts as virginity loss in the context of sexual assault. With this experience in mind, I conducted the three follow up interviews in a way that allows for participants to find that "amid their despair lies hope, and hope is cultivated in these safe spaces" (Fine & Weis 261). Because opportunities to discuss honest stories of the sexual debut, pleasure, and sexual assault are not readily available for young women, I tried to facilitate this space in my interviews, following up on the rapport I was able to build during the focus groups, so that participants can have a physical space to talk about their truths as an active listener.

In addition to the narrative based research that I conducted, I also used critical discourse analysis to examine sex advice columns in *Cosmopolitan*. This analysis serves to contextualize participants' notions of sexuality and their sexual stories (Plummer) within popular media

discourses. It is generally accepted that “the media provide idealized images of femininity and of sexual roles that are often narrow and stereotypical in nature” (Kim & Ward 48). Using this claim, I look specifically at the how narratives of female sexuality, sexual pleasure and virginity exist in media sources for young women in the United States. If you looked at the frequency of mentions of sexuality in women’s magazines, you might posit that over half of the content in these magazines discusses female sexuality. I challenge that assumption and am investigating the ways that these columns frame sexual pleasure and reinforce limited discourses of acceptable sexual knowing (Kim & Ward 49).

Discursive methods are often used to examine sexual pleasure narratives in US magazines. Joshi, Peter, and Valkenburg found that magazines frequently feature “sexual risks and the negative consequences of sex,” despite a blatant lack of articles about pleasure (463). Michelle Fine calls this void in popular media regarding sex positive female sexual health “the missing discourse of desire”. I build on this idea using the “affective turn” of the social sciences to drive my analysis of sexual pleasure and sexual danger in *Cosmopolitan* for the purpose of understanding the social and cultural contexts that my participants are navigating. The affective turn is a move towards understanding (in political and social contexts) how bodies are acting with each other. Affect theory encompasses a wide variety of texts that look at the configuring of the body and “its ongoing affectual composition of a world” (Seigworth & Gregg 3). Bodies act and interact with each other based on available discourses. These magazines are one of these discourse producers, and thus must be examined. Affect can be understood as beyond emotion, meaning that affects are more than just a collective group of feelings or interactions between humans. Affects “emerge in situations of the encounter and interaction (between bodies) (Seyfert 27). Notions of sexual danger and desire, two affective themes that drive dominant discourses of

sexuality that I explored in this context analysis, exist through these question and answer column interactions and interactions between the magazine and the reader. In this way, Cosmopolitan reproduces and creates affective meanings about sex and sexuality that can have lasting social impacts and implications for the ways that young women choose to discuss their sexual debut and sexual experiences.

### **Research Design**

My research project has changed quite a bit since its conception. However, because this research uses qualitative methods that encourage reflexive and fluid research practices, I have been able to negotiate my project around changing guidelines. Originally, I planned to examine how female pleasure narratives are shaped through storytelling at Bowdoin, Middlebury and Colby. I intentionally picked these schools because they have similar collegiate environments to Colby, but by recruiting participants there, I could significantly increase my sample size and look to see how each school facilitates female sexual experiences. However, because of IRB problems, I was not able to recruit at Bowdoin or Middlebury, and so I refocused my research to look specifically at the narrative strategies that young women at Colby used to navigate changing discourses of sexuality and acceptable sexual behaviors.

My original research question was: *How do women's narratives of the sexual debut demonstrate, or not, affective trends around pleasure?* I split this question up into a few succinct ones. *What narrative strategies do women use to tell sexual stories while negotiating changing sexual discourses? How do focus groups, as a feminist methodology, facilitate these conversations as an interventionist method?*

My research design has moved from exploring the role of affect in the retelling of sexual debut narratives to a more methodological one that expands on Hannah Frith's work using focus

groups in sex research and includes a lengthy narrative analysis. Specifically, I examine the narrative techniques used by these young women to tell their sexual stories in the context of their friend groups, as told through the focus groups. Additionally, I locate how these women used body boundary work to differentiate themselves from their sexual bodies as a disembodiment tactic in order to traverse their limited sexual discourses at the time.

### **Sampling Methods**

I conducted five focus groups, working with a total of 36 self identified women. Each focus group had participants from different grades, different places around the world and different sexual experiences I used convenience sampling to recruit women at Colby for my research. I posted a recruitment script on Colby's entire student email list to advertise my research, and also asked participants to ask their friends if they might be interested. I was able to recruit participants who otherwise may not have been interested had it not been for their friends' persuasion. While the sampling was targeted towards all Colby female students, I situated focus groups to include a wide variety of ages, races, and sexualities (if known) for the discussion. I was purposely sampling in order to evoke the most meaningful conversations in these groups. I did this with the hope that "through meeting together with others and sharing experience, women will develop a clearer sense of the social and political processes through which their experiences are constructed – and perhaps also a desire to organize against them" (Wilkinson 115).

While some researchers intentionally recruit participants with similar backgrounds in order to allow for "uninhibited discussion" (Frith 282), I found that participants' shared experience negotiating their first sexual experiences was enough similarity to allow for productive conversations across racial, sexual, and class boundaries. While these intersecting identities innately affect the experience of these young women's first sexual experience, and

subsequent retelling, I focused particularly on the gendered “heterosexual script” because that was the discourse that the majority of participants negotiated through their “sexual stories” (Plummer).

These focus groups acted as consciousness raising sessions, and created new friendships, alliances, and interests around female sexualities on campus between these women. This is not a new outcome of focus groups. Some women knew each other in my focus groups, but none of them were close enough friends to disrupt the group dynamic. The conversation was rich throughout these groups because “by contradicting and disagreeing with each other” these young women were able to direct the conversation based on shared sexual discourses (Wilkinson 118). Part of the value of focus groups is that they create a physical collective space, which is critical for counter hegemonic discussions of pleasure and sexuality (Rodriguez 495). I held three follow up interviews with participants to get more in depth narratives of their sexual debut. I intentionally tried to recruit those who may have felt silenced during parts of the focus group, but the women I ended up speaking with were largely talkative in the groups.

In order to ground my work in relevant social contexts, I used discourse analysis and some content analysis of 20 recent *Cosmopolitan* to locate one of the places where young women are receiving their sexual education and learning how to police and interpret their own sexualities and desires. I used texts that were all produced and primarily distributed in the United States in order to contextualize experiences of sexual education for the majority of the participants in my project. Cultivation theory, described by Janna Kim and Monique Ward, suggests that the more you are exposed to content in a magazine, the more the reader’s beliefs and attitudes mirror the published content (49). This indicates the potential educational influence of magazines, especially widely circulated ones like *Cosmopolitan*. *Cosmopolitan* is found all over the country,

and is published by Hearst (one of the largest publishing companies in the world), which makes this magazine a good representation of mainstream female focused magazines (Kim & Ward 50). Cosmopolitan's motto is "Fun, Fearless, Female" is clearly a description of their ideal reader. With this in mind, I use the "heterosexual script" to address how Cosmopolitan is framing sexual pleasure and sexual danger that ultimately racializes and limits available discourses of sexual knowing for young women. The "heterosexual script" is the set of cultural values and expectations that dictate how men and women should interact. I used this analysis of Cosmopolitan to both frame and understand the sexual stories that the women in the focus groups shared. This is the sexual discourse that most of the women in the focus groups used to frame their first sexual experiences. This sexual discourse provided limited sexual knowledge for these women at the times when they first became sexually active, and then required them to negotiate their own sexual behavior and knowledge so that they wouldn't deviate too much in the context of this policing discourse.

## **Data Collection Methods**

### **Focus Groups**

I conducted five focus groups over the course of two months with self-identified females at Colby. These groups were conducted on campus and participants were compensated financially. Some common stories when discussing the first time or the sexual debut in these focus groups were: feeling like everyone lied to you about what it would be like, feelings of physical and emotional pain in the aftermath, the wish or expectation of knowing your partner emotionally before engaging in sex with them, and the lack of communication between parents and children about sex and their sexual activities. Additionally, participants engaged in a variety of narrative strategies both in telling their sexual stories in the context of the group, and as they

described their conversations with their friends. With these themes in mind, I posed opening questions in the follow up interviews that ask participants to engage with these themes and share more relevant stories. I found that using a narrative analysis helped me unpack some of the ways that participants framed their sexual stories that they weren't able to articulate outright.

Some of the questions that I asked in the focus groups were:

- *What are some words that we can use that we associate with virginity or sex in general?*
- *Think back to the first time you talk about sex with your friends. Can you think about some of the things you talked about?*
- *Think back to your first sexual experience, what did it mean to you?*
- *Can you talk about the time when you realized that you were a sexual being?*

In addition to analyzing the conversations had during these 90-minute groups, I also looked at communal word maps around the word “virginity” that I made with each focus group. At the beginning of each session, I asked participants to say words and phrases that they associated with “virginity” and I put them up on a big piece of paper to help us frame our conversations. These word maps proved to be very helpful during these groups, especially in one of the groups that relied heavily on my questions to lead the conversation. I framed the questions I asked around the themes on the word map, so that participants felt like they were helping to shape the questions asked and the conversations in the group.

Words that were on these maps from all five groups included: “awkward, embarrassing, pain, pure and blood.” While I did not explore the implications of these associations, these repeated words could show some insight to what these 36 young women expect during “virginity” loss. This activity was a good way to begin these focus groups because, after introductions, it allowed us to create something together, providing us with a roadmap for the rest of the session. While participants would shout out a word, many others could be seen

nodding their head or verbally agreeing with each other which allowed the group to come together and laugh about their sexual debut before even beginning conversation. This locating of common experiences facilitated rapport within the group and led to rich conversations. Hannah Frith discusses how “consensus, agreement and shared experience within the group can lead not only to the increased likelihood of disclosure, but also to more elaborated and detailed information than is common in one-to-one interviews” (284). I experienced this in the groups that I conducted, and by having participants engage in a group activity in the beginning of the group, this shared experience promoted an engaged discussion for the rest of our time together.

When coding these interviews, one of the reasons why I videotaped each interview in was so I could look at how absences in conversation, and bodily information might help me understand participants’ experience in the focus group. Dalia Rodriguez writes: “it is often what is left unsaid that is key to understanding the respondent’s world (496), and so I coded these data taking into account gaps in conversation, silences and facial expressions in order to understand the meanings behind stories, and how the focus group is interacting with their ability to share their stories. Because of time constraints, I ended up focusing on the audiotaped interviews, but still took note of long pauses and changes in tone and energy among participants.

I also asked participants to fill out four questions at the end of the focus group on an index card: *Can you write a short paragraph describing your sexual debut? How old were you when you had sex for the first time? Are you currently sexually active? How do you identify sexually?* These questions were intended to provide me with some additional information about the specific story of their sexual debut. This allowed participants who didn’t get to explicitly share their story, or who felt like they left something out, to write their stories for me to collect. As I went through and transcribed and coded the focus groups, I used these written stories as



points of references for participants when I didn't get all the details of the story verbally.

Additionally, comparing the stories on the card with the sexual stories that these women shared in the context of the focus group gave me another way to look at how verbal, interactive, storytelling provided (or didn't provide) participants with the space to adequately share their experience.

### **Interviews**

I conducted three unstructured interactive follow up interviews with participants from my focus groups. I intended for these interviews to be spaces where I followed up on some of the themes that have emerged in the focus groups including: shame, false expectations, and lack of communication with parents. Additionally, I used this space to get more contextual information about participants so that I could locate their experiences within broader social ones via the discourse analysis that I conducted. I ended up not using these interviews for much analysis due to time constraints. Some of the questions that I asked included:

- *Can you tell me how you felt about the focus group?*
- *Have you thought about the focus group since you've left?*
- *Were there any parts of the focus group that made you uncomfortable?*
- *(How) has your understanding/relationship with sex changed over your life?*
- *Can you talk about a significant moment where your understanding of sex changed?*

### **Discourse Analysis**

I used magazines for my critical discourse analysis because they have played a role in the socializing of women in the United States (Ferguson), and claim to be the recent experts on topics from sex to family life. Magazines have taken on the distinct role of managing women's bodies in accordance with hegemonic discourses of womanhood and beauty. The structures of these magazines has changed from texts focused on domesticity and tips for being a good wife,

to columns and articles that sensationalize female sexuality and heterosexual dating relationships.

With this in mind, I examined the ways that these magazines frame sexualities and the power that they have to shape experiences and interpretations of sex for women. I ordered a package of 20 *Cosmopolitan* magazines dating from March 2010 to April 2013 from eBay. This package does not include every magazine between these dates, which is a potential limitation of this discourse analysis. The previous owner of these magazines could have self-selected magazines issues that she/he liked instead of buying a magazine every month. Despite this, 20 magazines out of the 26 potential ones provide us with an extensive sample to examine. I look at the content of two columns, relevant photographs, titles, and author pseudonyms. “Sex Q & A” is one of these columns, and it is published both in print and on *cosmo.com*. One woman writes this column (a licensed sex Psychologist) and answers inquiries from readers about their sex problems/desires. A variety of feminist researchers consider women’s magazines offer “a way of revealing the ways in which women’s lives, issues and identities are articulated in this particular public sphere” (Reviere & Byerly 677). It is interesting to note what kind of women’s issues the publishers and editors choose to present in these magazines, especially as *Cosmopolitan*, on some level, seems to market to all females.

While I read *Cosmopolitan* intending to conduct a critical content analysis, women reading magazines like *Cosmopolitan* (and other female centric magazines) often interpret these texts as sexual education sources (Fine & McClelland 2006). Fine and McClelland discuss that the “discourse of adolescent desire is no longer missing” (300) in reference to the explosion of conversations about female sexuality in popular media. However, the content of this discourse is not representative or inclusive of a variety of women, and is not necessarily positive,

ungendered, and encompassing of working class people and people of color. Fine and McClelland identify that “a caricature of desire itself is now displayed loudly, as it remains simultaneously silent” (Burns & Torre; Harris; Tolman; as cited in Fine & McClelland 300). I interpret this to mean while there are plenty of mentions of female sexuality in media representations, most of these are not cognizant of underlying assumptions about womanhood and who gets to be represented in popular discourses of pleasure. Understanding how race operates within *Cosmopolitan* is an essential part of examining how hegemonic masculinity and female sexuality are defined. My analysis ultimately examined how dominant ideologies about sex are presented to women readers, and at what cost of exclusion. Using the social constructionist theory outlined previously, I coded these columns in relation to the ways that they construct meanings of sex and sexuality “based on the assumption that sexualities and sexual experiences are produced, changed and modified within an ever-changing sexual discourse” (Tiefer 17).

These affective trends are prevalent and relevant to the focus groups that I conducted insofar as they embody common themes of shame and silencing that have constructed many of these women’s experiences and their narrative construction of such. I used this discourse analysis to illuminate one of informal pedagogies of sexual knowledge and sexual experience that they young women interacted with, as they had to negotiate their own sexual body and experience in the context of their friend groups.

### **Methods of Analysis**

In order to code the transcribed focus groups and interviews that I conducted, I used Dedoose; a web based mixed methods research software. In the first round of coding, I looked for repeated patterns in the content of participants’ stories of their first sexual experiences. I paid

particular attention to the places that they located as spaces of sexual education, both informal and formal. When coding the second time around, I looked closely at narrative strategies, including periods where women marked transitions in their narratives, hesitated, made justifications, and were self-deprecating. Additionally, I looked closely at the ways that women constructed their stories; were they using relational definitions, symbolic boundaries, or qualifiers? This coding guided the project towards a narrative based analysis and so I went back through the transcripts again looking specifically for moments of interaction within the focus groups. I had initially coded broadly for “focus group effects” and parsed through that to examine the ways that women engaged with each other in conversation, and for what purpose.

### **Reflexive and Ethical Considerations**

In my IRB application, I emphasized the measures that I would take to keep this data private and confidential, and opened each focus group with a conversation about what it means to create a safe space and the expectations for confidentiality. I anticipated conversations about sexual assault during the focus groups, specifically in the context of learning about what sex was and first sexual experiences and made it clear in the IRB that I acknowledged the ethical concerns of these conversations, particularly because I could not guarantee confidentiality. In the consent forms that participants signed, I named this risk clearly. In order to thoughtfully consider the data I collected, I consciously thought about, before, during, and after the focus groups, how my own knowledge about sex and sexuality is being produced, and how I could make sure that my own self awareness did not fracture or influence the interviews and focus groups that I held (Bhavnani, 66). Donna Haraway says that a feminist researcher must be accountable, position themselves and be partial, and so I tried to conduct the focus groups and interviews using those three ethical guidelines.

The first focus group basically ran itself, the second was almost as seamless, but in the third, I was in a position where I felt like the participants were looking at me for the next question or even the next answer, they seemed to clearly feel the divide between participant and facilitator and so it was particularly difficult to remain partial and keep my narrative out of the group (for consistency). The fourth and fifth focus groups ran like the first two, and it was easy for me to let them run the conversation. During the process of conducting focus groups, I began to understand how using focus groups uncovered the epistemologies of sex and female sexuality for participants.

In the second focus group, three of the participants talked about their experiences of sexual assault and how those were all their first moments of understanding what sex was. But, what the second focus group emphasized was that virginity loss was much less about the first "physical" time, but rather, the first time where you felt like you were having an awkward but positive experience. Much of the literature that I used in my initial literature review for the IRB talked about what "virginity loss" meant to women vs. men, but a question that emerged through this project, and from this second focus group in particular, is how are we defining virginity, and what experiences are we subsequently silencing (or privileging) by doing so?

My role as a researcher was different in every focus group, as I navigated the needs of the participants. In some groups, I felt people looking for me to say something about my own experience; participants seemed to want validation by hearing other similar stories. My choice to try and remain a passive researcher instead of a participant was really difficult at times, especially in one focus group where it took longer for people to get comfortable sharing.

## **Findings**

Three major themes came out of the analysis of my data. The first was that participants in

the focus groups identified their friend groups as sites for potential policing based on appropriate discourses of sexual knowing. Their relationship to the sexual norm of the friend group affected their ability to share their sexual stories and knowledge without judgment. The second theme was that participants identified limited discourses of sexual knowing that they had to navigate when they first began to have sexual experiences. In response to these limited discourses, many participants spoke about their dissociation between their sexual body and self and their strategies for rationalizing their behavior to themselves as ways to manage their newfound sexuality without a sexual discourse. The third theme that emerged was that these focus groups as an interactional space facilitated the space and rapport for many of these women to share stories that they had never shared before. Additionally, these groups allowed for both rich individual narratives, and the naming of shared and similar experiences among women.

A predominant theme that emerged from my analysis of data was that women engaged in narrative strategies when talking about sex within their friend groups in order to navigate differing levels of sexual knowledge. Female friendships were emphasized as a place for both support and “friendly judgment”, as one participant named it. 23 women in the focus groups named their close friendships as a space where they negotiated differing levels of sexual knowledge. However, inclusionary and exclusionary discourses of sexual knowing restricted the ability for many of these women to discuss their sexual experiences with their friends.

Participants named a boundary of sexual knowing within their friend groups as “a wall” and as a “gap” that was “hard to bridge”. Gatekeeping strategies became a central part of these women’s sexual stories as they explained the strategies that they used to negotiate these different discourses of sexual knowing. 12 participants named different boundaries of sexual knowledge among their high school friends and college friends; with all but three of them saying that their

college friends were safer spaces for talking about and learning about sex without judgment. Out of the 36 participants in the focus group, 13 women identified themselves as among the first people in their friend groups to have sexual experiences with one participant noting “*with my friends in high school I was the most sexually active out of them so I didn’t really talk to them that much about it because they didn’t really have that much to say about it*”. Women often hesitated when talking about their sexual experiences in the focus group, perhaps remnant of the strategies that they engaged in among friends in order to negotiate norms of monogamy and notions of acceptability.

Three participants identified exclusionary and inclusionary criteria for their friend groups on the basis of a threshold sexual knowing and sexual experience. Others noted that in certain spaces, they silence their own sexual experience so as not to make the group uncomfortable. Close friendships were valued most, insofar that they provided a space for safe and judgment free conversations about sex. Censorship and self-policing of both sexual knowledge and sexual experience with friends was a recurring theme in focus groups. Women used a variety of narrative techniques to negotiate the symbolic boundaries of sexual knowledge that inhibit their friendships. Negotiating these gates of sexual knowledge restricts the ability for young women to freely talk about their sexual knowledge and experiences with each other. In the following excerpt, Lucy talked about how her sexuality made her feel judged in her friendships. She identified this disconnect as “a wall in between us”:

*“I have a lot of friends that like still have never had sex before so like when I talk about it they have gotten comfortable with me telling them about it but there is always going to be this like almost like a wall in between us where like because they obviously don’t think I’m a bad person or easy or anything but there is always going to be something like they will never understand the way I approach sex because they are just so different about it.”*

Lucy's narrative exposes the salient symbolic boundary of sexual knowing between herself and her friends. Through discourses of sexual knowing, Lucy identified a "wall in between" her and her friends, which required narrative strategies to negotiate. Lucy's narrative recognizes that while her friends have become "comfortable" with her conversations about sexuality, there is something that they will never understand about the way she approaches sex. Lucy and her friends constantly negotiated the wall in between them, trying to find the "in roads" that would bridge this gap of sexual knowing. This boundary is subsequently reinforced by the narrative strategies that young women, including Lucy, are using to connect with their friends about their sexual experiences, entrenching hegemonic sexual knowledge discourses.

Lucy referenced comfort as one way to gatekeep her sexual knowledge and bridge that "wall" within her friend group. The dynamics of a clique apply within any given friend group, with friends categorized as either leaders or followers. Depending what role a person takes within their friend group, they have different access to sexual experiences and sexual knowledge. They feel comfortable with their sexual activity based on the "rules" and experiences of the leaders in the group (Adler & Adler 73). If the alpha of the group has sexual experience, then the rest of the group will have more opportunities to discuss all things sexual, bridging that "wall". However, if the leader of the clique does not have sexual knowledge or experience, they may restrict and police their friends' sexuality so that their own sexual status is not threatened. This is where the inclusionary and exclusionary boundaries of the friendship become enforced on the basis of sexual knowledge.

Secondly, Lucy emphasized that her friends don't think she's "a bad person or easy or anything", but she still feels judgment from them. This qualifying statement eludes both to the norms of monogamy and appropriate sexual behavior within Lucy's friend group, and positions



her own discomfort with her own sexuality. Lucy used the phrase “not that they think I’m easy or anything” to position herself as someone who engages in casual sex, but still considers herself someone who values having sex with people you care about. Lucy implies that her friends are uncomfortable with casual sex, and so in order to engage within their context of sexual knowledge and understanding; she must emphasize her relational connections with partners in order to make amends for her deviation from the norm of the group. Finally, Lucy qualified her statement unprompted, almost like she was anticipating judgment from the focus group about her friends’ acceptance of her sexual knowing, or of judgment from the group about her behavior. The opinions of friends have a huge influence on the way that women think about themselves. Lucy framed her own sexual comfort within the context of her friends. Lucy noted that her friends “still have never” had sexual experience, and emphasized the word “still”, implying that Lucy’s understanding of acceptable sexual knowing is different than her friends.

When young women are unable to rely on their friends for both sexual information and support, whom are they turning to? Leah’s narrative notes her reliance on her high school boyfriend for both sexual information and sexual support. In the following excerpt, Leah identified how expectations for sexual behavior, based on age, created the possibilities for sexual knowing, and reinforced boundaries between her and her friends.

*“I remember feeling like I couldn’t tell my friends about it because I think I was the first one of them to ever have sex and I don’t think they did for two more years so it was never something I like talked about it was something that was just really between me and him.”*

In this statement, Leah relied on her partner for emotional support while exploring what it meant for her to be sexual when her friends were not. Leah noted that if she talked to her friends about her sex life, she would make them uncomfortable. Leah’s reluctance to talk to her friends about sex was “because I think I was the first one of them to ever have sex”. She constructed her

own sexuality in contestation with the norm of her friend group in order to situate her own sexual script and their ignorance. Instead of identifying her own sexual knowledge, she engaged in a strategic narrative strategy by identifying her own sexual knowledge in relation to her friends. Leah's decentering of self in her narrative shows how important it was for her to be accepted by peers. Additionally, this decentering highlights how pervasive peer social norms are in individual's self-confidence and identification of self. Women across the focus groups explained how salient this boundary of sexual norms was in both high school and college. For example, in high school, Leah relied on her boyfriend for social support because she was unable to rely on her friends. When she realized that discussions about sexuality among her friends were not going to happen, she turned to her partner for support. Leah constructed her relationship with her boyfriend as both private and monogamous, stating that sex was "something that was really just between me and him". In doing so, this excerpt indicates how symbolic knowledge boundaries between friends disallow the free flow of sexual information and pushes women to look for an emotional connection and supportive sexual knowledge in relational connections with partners, ultimately perpetuating notions of monogamous heterosexuality. However, Leah still negotiates these boundaries of sexual knowing in her friend group in college, which she describes as being full of "friendly judgment".

Young women construct the bounds of acceptable sexual behavior by using narrative strategies including qualifiers, relational definitions, and age expectations as policing mechanisms. Elizabeth Armstrong and her colleagues noted that women compete with one another and sexually evaluate each other (103). Because of this dynamic, Tara felt isolated from her friends as soon as she started having sex. Tara identified her own sexual behavior in relation to that of her friends. She recounted the ways that varying sexual experience among friends led

to the subsequent silencing of her own experience. This excerpt identifies what the specific boundary differentiating appropriate and inappropriate sexual knowing was for this friend group.

Tara explained the way that she negotiates norms among her “significant others”:

*“Yeah when I was in 9th grade I had a serious boyfriend and he would like finger me and my friends were really kinda innocent like they were the kind of people who had like never kissed anyone before so me having a boyfriend and me moving to the next level was just something that they didn’t get ... and it wasn’t until like senior year when they finally figured out that that was happening, and I never really had those conversations with them.”*

Tara located her first sexual experiences by immediately pitting herself against the dominant sexual discourse within her friend group. She identified that her sexuality differentiated her from her “innocent” friends. Both Tara and her friends enforced this symbolic boundary of knowledge, and until they were on the same page, so to speak, about their sexual experiences, they were unable to connect. Tara identified this “next level”, the boundary of knowledge, as any sexual activity beyond kissing. By labeling her friends as “the kind of people”, Tara implied some group sexual identity bound by lack of sexual experience that she distinguished herself from.

In this excerpt, Tara identifies her relevant sexual experience, and then distances herself from the object of her story, focusing on her identity as it operates relationally among her friends. This intentional identification via the other shows how operational boundaries construct identities through differentiation. Tara uses the rhetoric of the “next level” to identify the ways that she and her friends engage with symbolic boundaries of sexual knowledge. What are the implications for the people who deviate from their friend group’s sexual expectations, or those that don’t?

Women create and police the boundaries of age appropriate sexual behavior, and in this excerpt, Tara identifies fingering as an appropriate sexual act in 9th grade by referring to her

friends as really “innocent” and not even having had kissed someone. In this sentence, Tara suggests that kissing is an acceptable behavior when you do not have a boyfriend, but once you’re in a relationship, more sexual activity is expected and appropriate. The linear narrative structure of the sentence creates a sequence of appropriate sexual acts. One young woman examines the way that discourses of “appropriateness” and monogamy police her ability to share her sexual experiences. Leah, who I mention earlier, notes:

*“I feel like something that you said about friendly judgment is really relevant for my group of friends, especially by the time sophomore year came around, there was like a core group of people that would go out and like occasionally hook up with someone and be fine about it and then some people that didn’t really have any experience and weren’t even comfortable really talking about sex so it became this kind of awkward encounter in Dana on a weekend morning when someone would want to talk about what they did and it just felt like you couldn’t because it wasn’t like a safe space because you didn’t want them to be judging you but you also didn’t want to feel like you were unhappy with what you did and that’s almost sort of still the case.”*

In this passage, Leah named the negotiation of sexual knowledge and experience with friends as “friendly judgment”. These strategies of knowledge gatekeeping were particularly salient on the weekend mornings in the dining hall. Leah articulated her discomfort discussing casual hook ups, because they directly challenge the notions of monogamy regulate acceptable sexual behavior. This passage emphasizes how relationships within friend groups, and cliques, are based on inclusionary membership qualifications. In this case, these inclusions are based on your ability to and interest in participating in monogamous sexual relationships. Leah juxtaposed herself (and her friends) who “occasionally hookup with someone”, with friends who not only do not have experience but also presumably are not “fine about it”, “it” being casual sex. While Leah does not explicitly define their discomfort, she is able to elude to it by emphasizing that she has to articulate how “fine” she is about these hook ups in order to defend her actions.

Participants identified a variety of challenges connecting with friends when they don’t

share similar sexual experiences. They negotiate their friendships based on their perceived ability to have conversations about their sexual experiences with their friends. Overwhelmingly, participants' stories positioned sexual knowing as an axis to discuss their sexual lives with their friends. One student noted the difficulty of imagining something that you have no informal or formal knowledge about. With regard to sex, Abby said:

*“It seemed almost bad to me, I don't really know why, just like I never could imagine [sex] and I felt a disconnect with people that had sex when I hadn't and I actually feel the same way now. Now that I have had a lot of sex and I also have friends that haven't had sex, I feel like we have a big disconnect like they just don't understand.”*

Abby identified a boundary of sexual knowledge throughout her narrative. She cannot name it, but describes her inability to circumnavigate it. First, Abby gave an example of one way that she felt less connected with her friends who were sexually active when she wasn't, saying “it seemed almost bad to me.” Abby judged her friends based on her own lack of sexual experience. Friends constantly take on new roles within their friend groups based on their sexual experiences, and so young women must negotiate their changing statuses. Secondly, Abby commented on this “disconnect” before having sex, and after having sex. Abby located herself on both sides of the “boundary” and noted that she “never could imagine” what the sexual experiences of her friends were like, despite her use of “imagine” which marks some attempt on her part to empathize. Now that Abby locates herself as sexually active, she says, “they just don't understand”. This universalizing statement is a strategic way for Abby to make sense of her shifting relational connections with her friends as they negotiate their sexualities. It takes the blame off of her, and puts it on her friends as a justification for the boundary work she's engaging in. This last sentence identifies her own discomfort with her friends, and her own feelings of their judgment. Why is Abby now forgetting her own active attempts to understand her sexually active friends and identifying her relationships as unbridgeable?

Participants named boundaries of sexual knowing within their friend groups that required careful narrative strategies to negotiate. Their construction of their own sexual knowing seemed dependent on the sexual discourses enforced by their “significant others”, their peer groups and close family. The negotiation of corporeality for these participants relied on careful gatekeeping strategies so as not to create deviant sexual identities for themselves among their friends.

### **Symbolic Boundaries of Bodies**

“The body becomes a human body, a body which coincides with the ‘shape’ and space of a psyche, a body whose epidermic surface bounds a psychical unity, a body which thereby defines the limits of experience and subjectivity... through the intervention of the... Other or Symbolic order” (Elizabeth Grosz 1992: 243)

The second theme that emerged in my analysis of the focus groups was that limited access to sexual discourses in childhood and early adolescence created a lot of confusion for participants as they began to explore their sexuality. Trying to masturbate, for 19 women in the focus groups, was a defining moment of sexual awakening. However, navigating desire and sexuality in the context of limited sexual knowledge and, for eight women, in the context of their religious beliefs, was challenging for these young women. Several engaged in strategic bodily boundary work, creating distinctions between their sexual body and their selves in order to justify their behavior in the context of desexualized childhood. Through relying on limited sexual scripts, essentialist discourses, and understandings of their own bodies, these women used boundary work to negotiate their sexual body as separate from their self. Robyn Longhurst notes that people often fail to talk about a body that “breaks its boundaries – urinates, bleeds, vomits, farts, engulfs tampons, objects of sexual desire, ejaculates and gives birth. The messiness of bodies is often conceptualized as feminized and as such is Othered” (23). This quote exemplifies the absence of discourse around the actual actions and physical potential of women’s bodies as sexual beings that these young women are negotiating by engaging in boundary work. The

following excerpts show how women negotiate the moments when their body “breaks its boundaries”.

Sarah discussed how she grappled with masturbation as a child. This excerpt illustrates Sarah’s internal negotiations with her own sexual exploration, as she struggled to understand her body and connect it to her own pleasure. Sarah engaged in what I’ll call bodily boundary work.

*“I was never taught how to masturbate um as a kid uh and so for the longest time I just like assumed that I did not understand the point of masturbation I just thought that like my body, my body did not masturbate.”*

In this excerpt, Sarah highlighted the ways that she created a symbolic boundary on her body, limiting the way that she was able to experience pleasure, let alone even conceptualize it. She was never taught how to masturbate in any formal way, so she spent years trying to figure out what masturbating and feeling pleasure meant for her body. After what she considered “failed” attempts to masturbate, she began to pathologize her body, unable to identify her own pleasure. Sarah identified her sexual experiences ambiguously because she has no discursive tools or framework in which to understand her own sexuality. Building on this, Shelly Eversley and Jennifer Morgan state “the question of female pleasure and sex, the female body and sex, thus depends on full engagement with ambiguity... new articulations of pleasure and of what power might mean” (12). Ultimately Sarah was unable to understand her sexual potential due to her lack of sexual knowledge.

Amy identified how her lack of sexual knowledge created a boundary between her body and its capacity to kiss. She utilizes boundary work to differentiate her body from her sexual body.

*“Um it was like I was so bad at it, it did not come naturally to me either so I like went home and googled like how to kiss how am I supposed to do this, it didn’t feel normal, but hopefully I’m better now!”*

Amy felt disconnected from her body when she didn't "know" how to kiss. Sexual discourses permeate this "natural" sense of knowing, creating a plethora of situations in which women are comparing them to a shadow of a shadow of a norm (Butler 22 "Critically Queer"). This essentialist discourse of sex and sexuality suggests that we just "know" how to have sex (and kiss), and our bodies are made for it. This clearly is not the case for Amy who feels betrayed by this discourse because she has to look up online how to kiss someone. It's important to note that she chose to look up how to kiss someone online instead of asking a friend, which highlights the policing within friend groups that often happens around sexual activity. Sexual experience is often stigmatized and policed by cliques, so by using the Internet as a resource allows her to circumnavigate the potential conflict or embarrassment from her friends. Her comment "it didn't feel normal" highlights the way that Amy constructs her own sexuality as a relation concept, and one that temporarily, and uncomfortably, deviated from the "normal".

In the following excerpt, Maddy identified how she figured out what was "normal" sexual behavior. She noted the conflicting sexual discourses that policed her ability to experience pleasure.

*"I don't really remember this but my mom likes to make fun of me for this, she like caught me making out with my friends, my girl friends, even though I knew that I wasn't attracted to girls but I wanted to practice making out, so I don't know. So my mom was like hey what are you doing and I was like um I don't know I saw it on a movie, well you might want to pump the breaks on that one and so I stopped because I was really embarrassed like my mom caught me for sure um and then I don't think like I even figured it like out that I like had a part that felt things until like the 8th grade."*

Here, Maddy framed this narrative by using her mom's memories of the event, differentiating herself from the memory of herself. Using Ken Plummer's breakdown of sexual storytelling, Maddy is not accessing this story "light off the tongue" but rather using "immense emotional work" to get her story out after a series of similar narratives about masturbation (25).



Maddy distinguished her sexual identity from her sexual actions by asserting that “I wasn’t attracted to girls” as a disclaimer for her behavior. She identified that she was kissing girls because she saw it in a movie, a classic example of the informal sexual pedagogies that young women are relying on for sexual knowledge. Maddy’s narrative illuminates the way that discourse shapes our own understanding of our behavior. She had no context of sexual discourse to understanding kissing girls within, and it was only when her mom shamed her that she began to associate this sexual action with something worth being embarrassed about, based on the heterosexual discourse that her mom taught her. Finally, Maddy located a sexual boundary on her body that she didn’t breach or understand until 8th grade. Maddy described this boundary by saying: “I don’t think I like even figured it like out that I like had a part that felt things”. This differentiation between self and sexual body demonstrates the ways that lack of sexual knowledge creates physical and emotional barriers for women. Additionally, this is a moment of self-objectifying from a disembodied perspective. These distinctions affect women’s ability to embody their whole selves and result in women distancing themselves from their bodies (Young 44).

In the following excerpt, Lucy described how objectified she felt after engaging in the hook up culture at Colby. Her ability to become the subject and not an object of sexuality is challenged by participating in the casual sex culture at Colby. What might this tell us about dominant discourses that value and create meanings for sexual subjects based on their adherence to monogamy?

*“Because like at the end of my whole like hook up life at Colby I didn’t even feel like a person I felt like just a thing and that’s the worst like one of the worst things you can feel.”*

In this narrative, Lucy experienced dissociation between her body as something concrete and humanistic and her body as an object for consumption. Feminine bodies are understood as the “object” of motion instead of a subject in motion (Young 39) and in this excerpt, Lucy understood her body to be the object of someone else’s pleasure, not her own. This boundary work is not voluntary, but rather a microcosm of discourse that pacifies and objectifies female bodies as sexual bodies, “a mere thing” (Young 39). Iris Young suggests that women understand their body as a “thing”, the sentiment that Lucy shares (35). Borrowing from Young, I claim that by negotiating limited feminine compartments, and by understanding that the most foundational acts that create meaning are through the movement and embodiment of the body, women must engage in dissociative body boundary work in order to maintain their own sense of self as they negotiate changing discourses of sexuality, and subsequent appropriate behaviors (35).

Katie points out the way that sex education, both informal and formal, both restricted and allowed her ability to experience and attach meaning to her own pleasure. In the following narrative, Katie identified the lack of sexual discourses about pleasure in her adolescence. This resulted in dissociation between her body and her sexual body because she was unable to name her own pleasurable experiences.

*“I feel like I didn't even like I didn't know about the pleasure element of sex until sophomore or freshman or sophomore year of high school and um it was funny cause I realized like I'd actually had orgasms before that because I was very like sexually I explored a lot like sexually.”*

In this excerpt, Katie tells the focus group the first time she realized what pleasure was. During sex education in high school, Katie learned that sex was more than just a reproductive act and could be something for pleasure. Only after learning this information was she able to reflect back on her experiences as a child and middle schooler and recognize her own experiences with sexual pleasure. Katie was unable to identify her own orgasms until she had the context of a

sexual discourse to create meanings about pleasure, orgasms, and her own sexuality. This disconnect between sexual experience and the ability to, or willingness to, attach meaning to it, resulted in a dissociation between her sexual body and the rest of her body.

The bodily boundary work that participants engaged in can be understood through their relationships with the “generalized other”, the set of discourses, meanings and values that shape our construction of self (Mead). When the “generalized other” circulates sexual discourses that don’t name women’s pleasure and sexual capacity, participants have no tools to navigate their own exploration and construction of self in contestation with this “other”, and so engaged in body boundary work. They used this bodywork to negotiate the disconnect between their sexual selves and the self that they were trying to create in line with the “generalized other” (ibid).

### **Feminist Focus Groups as a Transformative Practice**

The focus groups that I conducted provided a space where young women could build rapport with each other, and engage in conversations about sexual knowledge, sexual experience, and pervasive sexual discourses outside of the confines of a friend group. I will highlight two of the conversations within these focus groups that speak to both the discursive power of the space, and the feminist potential for these groups as places for intervention. In both of these examples, you can see the ways that the linear conversation of participants allowed for and created space for these narratives that these women had often never shared before. As a consciousness raising group, these women were able to understand their own interactions with oppression, limited sexual discourses, and policing friend groups by hearing about other people’s stories, raising their own self- consciousness in the process.

In the first focus group, I asked, “can you tell me about a time when you had boring sex?” Immediately, one participant asked: “is masturbation relevant”, to which I replied, “yes yes!”

First off, the fact that this participant who I'll call Mary, felt like her experiences masturbating were not widely considered to be "sex", indicates how pervasive anatomizing discourses of penis-vagina intercourse are for women's own interpretation of their sexual experiences. Mary then goes on to explain:

*"So I was never taught how to masturbate so like up until a couple of years ago I like did not know what it was and like I remember when I was little I would like touch myself and like it felt good but definitely never masturbated or like for anything other than sexual curiosity um I guess not even with sexual intent."*

Here, Mary opens up the conversation with her assertion that her own masturbation was both sex, and a boring experience, two narratives that challenge dominant sexual discourses. Additionally, Mary differentiated her own sexual intent from her actions, locating these first sexual experiences within the context of her "non sexual" self. After this narrative, the women in the focus group created space for conversations around masturbation, and build off of one another's stories. One participant responded to Mary, exclaiming, "That's exactly how I felt". This young woman, whom I'll call Ruthie, engaged in a back in forth with Mary with little quips about how they just both were "curious" about their bodies and were exploring without sexual intentions. They both emphasize how asexualized their first few times masturbating were, laughing with each other about how confused they were by their bodies. Mary and Ruthie's conversation with each other was the breeding ground for almost ten more minutes of conversation in focus group where four of the participants talked about when and how they learned what masturbation was and what it meant for them.

A young woman named Jo joined in, exclaiming, "I didn't understand why people would devote time to it." She was responding to Mary's comment: "I just like assumed that I did not understand the point of masturbation, I just thought that like my body, my body did not masturbate I guess." This dialectic conversation provided both women a space to engage together

and support one another's previously unspoken experiences. The conversation began with one participant talking about her own experience masturbating, and by the end of the conversation, the young women were thinking about why so many women say that they don't masturbate by commenting: "yeah like I didn't understand why people would devote time to it, maybe that's why so many girls say like I don't masturbate", and "yeah a lot of girls are like 'I don't masturbate and I would never do that'", and "yeah that's so funny cause maybe they just didn't know how to". This focus group provided the a physical space for these young women to talk open up about their sexual experiences in ways that they previously had not explored, and finished with a space that these women created both to talk about their own sexual selves and engage in an authentic critical analysis of why they haven't had these conversations before. This exchange allowed the women to create some consensus about their experience masturbating and clarified it to me (Montell 47). This is the feminist power of focus groups.

In the third focus group that I conducted, I asked, "what did it mean to you when you had your first sexual experience?" I asked intentionally vague questions so that participants could build off of one another in order to formulate their own responses to and understanding of my question (Montell 48). The opening responses were about feeling uncomfortable about making out and recognizing that it was "kinda intense for me." This young woman noted that: "I'm very open about this kind of stuff but I never even discussed what it meant in general like I don't think I've ever even told anybody that." This reflection opened up the conversation for one participant to note:

*"I definitely had a similar experience, like going into high school I was friends with a bunch of very innocent people like we were very academic like didn't really know that much about that sort of thing."*

Here, Ashley relied on the narrative before hers in order to justify her story in the context of the conversation. The interaction between participants is creating and reinforcing the local relevancies among this focus group that may or may not exist in the context of Ashley's friend group. Ashley then told the long story of her first sexual experience. Ashley began the narrative slowly, setting up the context of the situation:

*“Like this guy um it was a sleepover so I was like hanging out with all of my friends and we were walking around trying to find a good place to sleep, and every place we went down to find a place to sleep it was like a big open room and so we'd be like oh lets go to this corner or this corner he would come and like lay with us and stuff and we were like no go away we're trying to go to sleep.”*

After this, Ashley went on the detail the assault, emphasizing multiple times that “I was like not on board with him doing that”, “he didn't say is it okay if I touch here or is it okay if I do this.” As Ashley cried through the remainder of her story, the energy in the focus group shifted and the majority of the time thereafter was spent talking about experiences of sexual assault. Ashley's story opened the gates for Maddy's account of sexual assault. One of the benefits of focus groups is that they allow conversation to be framed based on the “categories and understandings of interviewees” rather than the interviewer (Montell 45) and in this case, participants wanted to talk about sexual assault as response to my question: “What did it mean to you when you had your first sexual experience?” Ashley ended her story saying, “that was like my introduction to intimacy with people”, and Maddy started her story saying, “My first time touching a penis was really similar.” The interactional potential of the focus group was really reached during these conversations, as participants continued to build off of one another and connect their experiences in their actual narratives. Maddy used her first time “touching a penis” as the jumping off point for her story about an aggressive assault in boarding school. Similar to Ashley, Maddy began her story talking broadly, specifically about what the hook up culture was

at boarding school, before diving into the details of her experience. Maddy framed her narrative around naiveté (“I was so naive”) while Ashley framed hers around innocence (“I was friends with a bunch of very innocent people”). Because Ashley had vetted the focus group as a safe space to talk about sexual assault, Maddy went into more explicit details about the violence than Ashley. For example,

*“Before I knew it he was a lot bigger than I was and he had used his body weight to nudge me against a snow bank so I couldn’t move and he took his dick out of his pants and wrapped my hand around it.”*

Maddy went on to assert that she didn’t have the vocabulary to understand this sexual encounter as sexual assault until much later, and felt like she “didn’t put up enough of a fight to warrant it being anything [sexual assault].” Maddy alluded to standards of wanted and unwanted sexual content, which places much of the responsibility for saying “no” on the woman. Maddy ended her narrative and noted “and that was my first introduction to penises”, closing out her story the same way that she began it, as a rhetorical strategy to claim the legitimacy of her story in the context of the conversation in the focus group.

Jade was the next participant to respond. She began her narrative saying, “Yeah, while we’re in this vain, like I was one of your friends that totally didn’t do anything in high school.” Jade strategically engaged with both Maddy and Ashley’s by positioning her own sexual inexperience as a precursor for her sexual assault at the beginning of her narrative. The trajectory of these three narratives of sexual assault moves from the least violent (at least in the telling of it) to the most violent. These stories were shared after an hour of conversations about sexual experiences and sexuality, and came at a time when rapport and trust had been cultivated among participants. Jade referenced Ashley’s narrative by saying, “like you were saying, there was no hey can I do this or slowly moving there”, a clear indication that these women were building their stories off of one another. This is a powerful effect of a successful focus group.

Jade referred back to Maddy's narrative noting, "I do remember like stopping resisting for a second, like lying limp and being like it for just a second and I was like I'm the problem here." This interactive conversation allowed for dynamic narratives from these three participants. Jade ended her story with a realization similar to both Maddy and Ashley,

*"I don't think I even thought of it as rape until like a year and a half later... and it was a very slow process of coming to terms with it and applying that label to it without feeling like I was being dramatic or making it up or looking for attention."*

This focus group facilitated dynamic narratives of sexual assault, by allowing a space where young women felt safe and heard, and where they could share their narratives with people who had engaged in similar coping strategies and narrative justifications. This created a sense of solidarity among participants, both among those that shared narratives of sexual assault, and the rest of the focus group who had the privilege of sharing a space with young women at a peak of vulnerability. The interactional potential of focus groups is demonstrated in this analysis, as it demonstrates the ways that these young women built their "sexual stories" (Plummer) off of each other, and created a generalized sexual discourse that they could name their negotiated gatekeeping strategies within.

### **Contextual Analysis**

In this paper, I outlined the specific ways that the young women in my focus groups used a variety of narrative strategies when talking about their first sexual experiences. Additionally, I located the specific ways that the feminist focus groups that I conducted facilitated these interactive stories. In order to contextualize the findings sections above, I identify one of the ways that women engage with informal sexual discourses as a primary mode of sexual knowledge production.

In order to understand how these young women are engaging with dominant sexual



discourses, we must examine the ways contemporary knowledge about sexual pleasure for women has been produced through television, magazines, and other mass marketed popular culture. To deconstruct prevailing beliefs about female sexuality, I examined how magazines produce normative sexual scripts. I used *Cosmopolitan* to highlight how these informal modes of sexual education communicate with young women. Sexual repression has operated throughout the history of the western world as a means of using biopower to control and regulate populations for the benefit of countries' economic and social success. Biopower is a force of regulatory action over sex, and as such, creates a binary definition of "licit and illicit" (Foucault 83) that has permeated modern understandings of sexual deviancy and the potential for pleasure (especially among women).

Magazines are able to pervasively influence sexual discourses by including Q & A columns that "use techniques such as putting advice in the mouths of 'real guys'" (Moran & Lee 161). This provides authenticity for the column writer. In this way, magazines like *Cosmopolitan* are able to shape sexual discourses, through a male gaze, through the guise of helping women enjoy sex. Subsequently, these publications present an oversimplified "version of the world... in which there is no social class, racial, political or economic difference, only gender opposites (Eggins & Iedema 167). This unnecessary dichotomy is representative of a cultural conversation around difference: "the marking of difference is the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture" (Hall 236). This part of my analysis ultimately examines how dominant ideologies about sex are presented to women readers. Using the social constructionist theory mentioned previously, I coded Q & A columns in *Cosmopolitan* to see how they constructed meanings of sex and sexuality "based on the assumption that sexualities and sexual experiences are produced, changed and modified within an ever-changing sexual discourse" (Tiefer 17).

*Cosmopolitan* is both creating and continuing a discourse that operates to police and define sexual activities as “good” and others as “bad”, building on Foucault’s comment on the, unnecessary, sex dichotomy of “licit and illicit” (83). Irvine asks: “how do public settings produce collective feelings?” (4), which *Cosmopolitan* answers with their alarmingly congruous columns that define acceptable feelings about sex for women. It must be noted, however, *Cosmopolitan* works within a white, heterosexual, middle class public sphere. This is a significant limitation because it sets up the magazine to position any behavior that they do not “identify” with (racially, sexually, in regards to class or ability etc.) as “other” and dangerous.

Sexual danger is emphasized through articles like: “Gyno Symptoms You Should Never Ignore” (Feb 2011 156) and “One Kind of Sex You Should Never Have With Him” (Apr 2012 158). These articles define specifically what kind of sex is appropriate, and angry sex is not one of them. Interestingly, the article “One Kind of Sex You Should Never Have With Him” suggests to readers that they engage in retail therapy, drinking or a massage from a hot man in order to avoid having angry sex (Apr 2012 158). Not only do the columns about sexuality in *Cosmopolitan* provide instructions for young women on how to behave, they also explicitly emphasize the kinds of sexual scripts that make up white heterosexuality. This article acknowledged a scene between Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet as the appropriate kind of angry sex- two clear representations of whiteness.

This normativity discourse continues to operate within women’s magazines and *Cosmopolitan* in particular. In line with the heterosexual script: one of the pieces of advice from a “Sex Tips From Guys” column is to “climb into my bed looking innocent, then do extremely dirty deeds. A girl who looks virginal but is really a sex kitten is every man’s dream” (Cosmo.com). White women are being equated with purity, reifying a discourse that requires

women to remain “pure” and chaste while men are encouraged to have highly sexual lives. Not only does this statement create an unattainable standard for women, but it also places an overt emphasis on appearing virginal, for the benefit of men. Using the term “virginal” has implies standards of womanhood, whiteness, monogamy, and tradition that construct the experience and expectation of virginity for people (Medley-Rath 26).

For example, Jessica Knoll, one of the authors of the sex Q & A column, suggests to a 25 year old virgin woman who is worried about telling potential sexual partners: “definitely fess up before you get busy” (Sept 2013 134). This frames *Cosmopolitan* as an authoritative subject on sexuality; it also suggests that there is something about virginity that is so shameful that it requires an active confession. “Shame is produced out of the clashing of mind and body”, and here we can see this conflict operating between this woman’s “physical” virginity and her emotional and mental interest in sexual activity with her partner (Probyn 81). Instead of asserting how women can take control of their sexuality and relationships via “go-getting”, women are taught to be demure agents of change in relationships. Messages like “it’s a normal guy thing”, and “try to get used to it,” suggest to women that they will scare off their partner if they engage in any sort of productive confrontation about these sexual issues (Reviere & Byerly 688).

These sorts of convoluted message about female empowerment, in a magazine designed and marketed in many ways to assert the “fearlessness” of women, are highly flawed. Countless feminist researchers have found that magazines targeted at young women and teenagers implore a sexual script that focuses on the dangers of sexual activities (Carpenter; Garner et al.) In many ways, the shaming of young women for their sexual desires and sexual experience is a form of victim blaming. In the column where the woman was told to “fess up” about her virginity, the author and magazine, are saying that if she doesn’t confess her sexual history, she will be at fault

when her boyfriend leaves her. In this way, *Cosmopolitan* is creating a culture in which women are constantly under scrutiny for their sexuality.

While *Cosmopolitan* may not be marketed as a sexual education resource for young women, women often interpret it as such, and thus these kinds of absolutist messages about sexual preferences and sexual roles can be extremely detrimental for young women. Women are expected, via implicit and explicit messages, to develop a breadth of sexual skills in order to keep their men. Clearly this reifies socialized gender differences and the assertion that men's bodies are primal in nature and know how to please women (obviously a fallacy). While *Cosmopolitan* is certainly not for young teenage girls, it uses a shock factor to make it an exciting commodity for the young adults who can get their hands on it.

Research shows that “young women placed high value on the sexual health information that they received from teen magazines” (Wiegman 496). Arguably, these young woman place even more value on information from magazines marketed to 18-35 year olds (like *Cosmopolitan*). It isn't enough to just conduct a discourse analysis looking at the knowledge production and biopolitical policing of female bodies in *Cosmopolitan*, we must look at the ways in which these policies create a climate of isolation and shame. *Cosmopolitan's* location as the “generalized other” for many women around the United States makes a critical analysis of the ways that it perpetuates its own sexual discourse central to this project.

## **Discussion**

Using the thematic findings from the feminist focus groups that I conducted, and examining one of the ways that sexual scripts and sexual discourses are created and dispersed to young women, what are the feminist interventionist implications for focus groups both as a critical methodology and as a form of consciousness raising? Throughout the focus groups that I

conducted, women, through their telling of sexual stories, were explicit about the ways that their relationships with friends operated as policing forces around their sexual experience and sexual knowledge. This runs contrary to the extensive literature that has demonstrated that same-gender friendships among females are “more intimate” than those between men (Benenson & Christakos 2003). Scholars have found that women turn to women in difficult times and rely on their “intimate” relationships with other women when they want to disclose personal feelings and information (Camarena, Sarigiani & Peterson; Riessman). Why were the women in the focus groups that I conducted explicitly challenging this notion that women turn to their friends in times of need or to discuss “personal” information? Many of the friendships that participants described can be understood under the umbrella of “cliques”, groups that function to include and exclude people on the basis of specific characteristics or experience (Adler & Adler). One participant commented: “I notice that like a lot of times like I have been policed or like it could just be me internalizing this and never the intention of my friends but like been most policed by my girlfriends.” Her recognition of the policing from her friends represents a common narrative throughout the focus groups and individual interviews. What then is different about conversations about sexual knowledge then that requires or encourages this sort of exclusionary and inclusionary judgment?

The young women in the focus groups described the ways that they constantly were negotiating boundaries for sexual knowledge within their friend groups, so they could avoid judgment and shame from their friends. They engaged in a variety of narrative strategies that came out in the focus groups when I asked questions generally like “Can you tell me about a time when you realized you were a sexual being”. Women answered these questions by including anecdotes about their confusion with their own sexuality in the context of limited

discourses of sexual knowing. As I noted in the second thematic section, participants referenced their limited discourses of sexual knowledge as an obstacle that they had to negotiate as they became sexually active. Using my analysis of *Cosmopolitan*, mainstream informal pedagogies of sexual knowledge emphasize purity, passivity, and normativity. The trickledown effect of this sexual discourse was emphasized throughout the focus groups that I conducted.

Normative sexual behaviors are explored in the game “Never Have I Ever” (Nov 2010 109). Essentially, there is a full-page spread that shows a variety of sexual acts, which have clearly been positioned as deviant, or non-normative sexual behaviors. Listed on the page include: “spanked a guy, had anal sex, kissed a girl, had an orgasm during sex, and been handcuffed in bed”. There are 63 total questions on the page, and the magazine is clearly outlining which activities are sexual taboos including: female sexual pleasure, BDSM, homosexuality, and voyeurism. So then, how is this magazine really “Fun Fearless Female” if it is equating female orgasms during sex as taboo? In line with Kim and Ward’s research on pleasure reading, it seems hard to imagine a young woman reading this and not feeling badly that she has engaged in any number of these activities. So then, how are the young women in the focus groups that I conducted negotiating their own early experiences of sexual pleasure if this is the discourse that they have to work within. They are being told explicitly by *Cosmopolitan* that they must engage in normative, heterosexual, white, monogamous sex, and if they deviate too far from this idealized image of female sexuality, then they are no longer just curious heteronormative sexual beings, but sexual deviants, with an identity bound to their sexual experience and desire.

Participants’ disembodiment as a survival strategy in a context without discourses of sexual knowledge, demonstrates how bodies are “materialized as ‘sexed’” (Butler xi). Which

bodies are allowed to be embodied sexual beings? Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, we can see how participants aren't choosing to embody sexual subjects but rather their bodies perform as a result of the regulatory nature of discourse (3). The implications for this kind of dissociative way of being are huge, and continuation of this research would try to unpack the ways that sexual bodies are constructed in elementary and mental school in the context of sex education and other early discourses of sexual knowledge as an intervention to prevent this sort of disembodied identity.

Ten participants remarked that their first conceptualization of sex and sexuality came from media representations, with one woman noting: "he kissed me and then he just left and I was like oh my god and then I went to my best friend and I told her and she was like omg that's so sweet I read about that sort of thing in magazines". This demonstrates one of the many ways that magazines become the authority figure on all things sex related. Because they often target middle class white heterosexual women, there is limited space for young women reading these magazines to negotiate or even name identities and experiences that challenge these hegemonic discourses. *Cosmopolitan* is a great example of the "generalized other", an object (or thing) that exerts its own values and moral standards of behavior onto those that interact with it. In the case of this paper, participants explicitly cited magazines as a method of informal sexual pedagogy.

This research is limited insofar as it only explored the ways that heterosexual sexual discourses shape participant's negotiations of embodied sexual stories. Future literature focusing on homonormative sexual discourses and norms of sexual knowing could add a new dimension to this work. Additionally, because my sample was all students at Colby College, this analysis has to be situated within a limited class and social capital context that encourages and facilitates "hook up culture." Next steps may expand this focus group based research to look at women

currently in high school and those in college, looking at the trajectory of sexual discourses in the construction of embodied sexual selves through this period of social transition. While this project showed how important the sexual norms of peer groups are in informing discourses of sexual knowing for participants, an important next step would be examining friend groups as holistic sites of sexual knowledge, in conjunction with feminist focus groups as another site of knowledge production.

As participants created their sexual selves, via interactions with “the generalized other” and “significant other”, they negotiated limited access to sexual knowledge. My project as a feminist intervention can be used as a disruptive sexual pedagogy for women in both high school and college. Focus groups are a powerful site for collecting interactive qualitative data and provide space for a reflexive analysis of the research in conjunction with potentially significant psychological, social and interactional benefits for participants in the form of consciousness raising. Using this project as a feminist intervention examining the negotiation of participants’ sexual corporeality, this project confirms the potential for focus groups as a feminist method. Additionally, this research advocates for a social constructionist analysis of dominant sexual discourses and the people and things that reinforce them, with the hope of queering these relationships to benefit future sexual pedagogies for young women.



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