

SEXUAL DESIRE AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS:
INVESTIGATION OF SOCIAL CONTEXT AND PERSONAL CHOICES

by

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Abstract

This qualitative inquiry uses a life history prospective approach to investigate the social context in which adolescent girls' sexual feelings emerge and in which girls' sexual experiences occur. Nine adolescent girls were interviewed at two points in time during their adolescence and themes from their narratives were analyzed with respect to their experiences with sexuality. It appears that peers, family members, and sexual/dating partners have a major effect on both, girls' sexual experiences and their connection with their sexual feelings. Prospective analysis revealed that over time, the social contexts of adolescent girls became more complex and girls became exposed to increasingly contradictory messages about what they should do and feel and behave. Girls appeared to have internalized the social messages around sexuality, which was evident through how girls talked about sexuality and through girls' direct reports that their decisions were affected by the social and familial implications of their decisions.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Historically, legal actions and discourses have served to control the sexual behaviour of women. Aristotle, in the third century B.C. argued that “women could not control sexual desires – therefore men need to govern their desires” (Durham, 1996, p.19). Subsequent discursive patterns portrayed women’s sexuality as dangerous and in need of control (Durham, 1996). Girls in western cultures of the Victorian era were perceived to be entirely asexual (Mennel, 1973, in Nathanson, 1991). Signs of sexuality in unmarried girls were seen as evidence of moral perversity; boundaries between “pure” (moral) and “fallen” (immoral) defined girls’ sexuality in absolute terms. Writers of the 1940’s and 1950’s represented girls with too much sexual interest as pathological: “frigid”, “immature”, and “emotionally deprived” (U.S . Children’s Burureau, 1946, in Nathanson, 1991). These misogynistic notions have helped to shape the conditions of women’s sexual lives through the years. While men’s sexual urges have come to be viewed as natural, women have come to be viewed as responsible for sexual gate-keeping, and for either satisfying or curtailing men’s sexual advances (Carpenter, 1998).

Female’s sexuality has become to be viewed as a threat on the structure of patriarchal, heterosexual sexuality (Adkins & Merchant, 1996). According to Snitow, Stanswell, and Thompson (1983), “any discourse which legitimates her (woman’s) pleasure, acknowledges her sexual knowledge, values her performance and places it under control, is potentially threatening to his masculinity” (p.29). Thus, in order to retain the cultural structure of masculinity and femininity, females’ sexuality ought to remain tamed.

Perceiving female sexuality as threatening not only contributed to the silencing of their desire and encouraged females into positions of subordination, but also ensued in the justification of aggression towards them. Beliefs about males' sexual drives and urges provided justification for male's sexual aggression and contributed to the acceptance of the notion of females' passivity (Kane & Schippers, 1996). Ironically, despite females' passive sexuality, females have been held responsible for encouraging males' aggression. For instance, a female's dress may be viewed as an invitation for male aggression. Further, since it is the female's responsibility to regulate sexual interactions; if a female displays sexual desire she is assumed to be encouraging male sexual advances and thus cannot expect the male to be responsible for their aggressive actions (Tolman, 1996). Such interplay of notions and assumptions has served as a justification for aggression against women (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1993).

The language available to females to describe sexuality and desire has been one of the mechanisms that perpetuated the silencing of their desire. Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Thompson (1994) have linked the limitation of language to social pressure on women to keep their sexual knowledge hidden in order to be decent. Thus, what females adopt is a language of heterosexual desire that places the male's needs above her own; female's desire becomes male-defined. The lacking space and language for females' discussion of their own sexuality contributes, in turn, to the lack of females' voices that explain how their experiences of sexuality affect the remaining aspects of their lives (Tolman, 1996).

Because adolescents often lack personal experience, their behaviours within their initial dating and sexual relationships are often based on expectations and imagined

experiences about the self in romantic situations (Miller & Benson, 1999), and are characterized by sexual exploration (Brown, 1999). Thus, adolescents are highly susceptible to external social influences and look to others for cues regarding appropriate and desired sexual behaviours (Brown, 1999). It is during adolescence that girls are socialized into cultural stories about being sexual and being women. It is also during adolescence that girls are most responsible for sexual decision making and are most penalized for acting on their own sexual desires (Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Tolman, 1994). Furthermore, it is their lack of experience with sexuality that makes girls more susceptible to the internalization of social messages.

In recent years, mainstream researchers have called for more experiential studies of girls' sexuality and acknowledged that girls' sexual desire is not only a legitimate but a necessary area of study (Brooks – Gunn & Frustenberg, 1989; Peterson, Leffert, & Graham, 1995). Feminist researchers have elaborated the ways we study female adolescent sexuality by asking adolescent girls about their perspectives on and experiences with romantic relationships and sexuality. However, research on the subject has been limited and few qualitative studies with adolescent girls exist.

The purpose of the present study is to further the understanding of how girls' socio-cultural contexts influence their experiences with sexuality and sexual desire. In the following sections, I will discuss research on the socio-cultural messages directed at adolescent girls about sexuality, focusing on media and popular culture as well as on sexuality-related discourses. I will proceed with the review of research on adolescent girls' experiences with sexual desire within their socio-cultural contexts. I will conclude this section of the paper by discussing the present study and its goals.

1.1 - Female Sexuality/Desire in Popular Culture

“Cultural scenarios [including messages about sexual ‘normativity’] are created and maintained by many diverse components of group life, including schools and educators, religious doctrines and leaders, folklore, sex research, and mass media” (Carpenter, 1998, p. 159). Mass media plays a particularly powerful role in the socialization of cultural norms and behaviours (Brumberg, 1997) including the regulation of female sexuality (Durham, 1996).

Girls do not get many positive messages about their sexuality. They are bombarded by a confusing and contradictory set of guidelines for how they should manage their developing sexuality: don’t be a “prude” but don’t be a “slut”; have (or fake) orgasms to ensure that your boyfriend is not made to feel inadequate, if you want to keep him. Girls are often described as “obsessed”, “confused” or “troubled” when they call boys, write them notes, or ask boys out, and their “permissive” behaviour often results in disapproving remarks in the media (Tolman & Higgins, 1996). In contrast, accounts of boys’ sexuality in the media are often portrayed as normal, natural, persistent, and demanding attention; their sexuality is portrayed as urges that boys and men cannot help or control (Hollway, 1989). It is only when boys molest and rape does boys’ sexuality receive a critical attention in the media (Tolman & Higgins, 1996).

Teen magazines, movies, and television contribute to the prevailing paradox. They offer advice on how to provide pleasure to boys juxtaposed with stories of sexual violation and harassment (Brumberg, 1997; Ussher, 1997; Carpenter, 1998). Carpenter (1998) conducted an analysis of sexuality-related content in the teen magazine *Seventeen*

across three decades, 70s-90s. She concluded that across decades victimized girls were more often seen as ones who made judgement errors; girls were seen as individual cases of girls who made bad decisions as opposed to girls who were victimized as part of a greater societal problem. In addition, when editors expressed opinion, they often preferred abstinence to pleasure, and generally promoted sexuality only within long-term monogamous relationships. Thus, the underlying message is that girls are not supposed to be sexual, unless they are within a long-term monogamous relationship, and if they are victimized, then it is their fault.

Similar contradictory messages prevail in the realm of popular music. For instance, when Christina Aguilera, an infamous pop-singer sings about “what a girl wants, what a girl needs”, she presents herself as a sex symbol, consciously turning her body into a “commodity”, and object of admiration and desire for others, obscuring how or even whether her own desires figure in her willingness to do “whatever keeps me in your arms” (Tolman, 2002).

Images of what constitutes “proper” sexual behaviour also appear in adolescent fiction literature. Janice Irvine (1994) conducted a textual analysis of twenty-nine novels directed at young women. She observed that the prevailing themes in these novels were “lessons that women should demonstrate a low level of sexual desire and should appear passive”, which she related to Victorian notions about passionless women’s sexuality (p.222). Such contradictory messages not only promote confinement of sexual desire but produce confusion about what behaviours and feelings *are* considered proper and acceptable.

Images of sexuality apparent in film and television are in line with those emitted through magazines, music and literature. Mariamne Whatley (1994) analyzed messages about sexual activities in popular films aimed at adolescents. She concluded that “the predominantly white films [she] saw accept the double standard of men wanting sex and women wanting ‘love’ (or another form of commitment)” (p.195). She reported that women were rarely seen as autonomous sexual beings and when they are, they are usually represented as “sluts”. These studies illuminate how female sexuality is regulated through media messages. The underlying message converging from the various mediums of popular culture is that it is almost impossible for girls and women to be sexual and desiring while adhering to acceptable social norms without acquiring a derogatory reputation, and that denying own sexual feelings is the safest option.

According to the messages emitted by the popular culture, the only way girls are justified to express their sexuality is within long-term, loving monogamous romantic relationships, thus following the “romance myth” (Carpenter, 1998; Hillier, Harrison, & Warr, 1998; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Thompson, 1994). The romance narrative prescribes a female to seek her “prince charming” that is their true love. Cultural messages allow the female to be sexual and satisfy a male’s sexual desires if, in return, she receives his affection and commitment. Sexual behaviour outside of such romantic relationship is unacceptable, however, and dooms the girls to be labelled a “slut”. According to this narrative, the underlying message of popular culture is that “girls do not want sex, what they really want is intimacy” (Tolman, 1994, p.250).

The narrative of romance prevails in all aforementioned mediums of popular culture (Carpenter, 1998; Garner, Sterk, Adams, 1998) and is internalized by their audience, adolescent girls. Tolman (2000) writes,

The familiar story that organizes ‘normal’ female adolescent sexuality is a romance narrative in which a good girl, who is on a quest for love, does not feel sexual desire-strong, embodied, passionate feelings of sexual wanting. In this story, sexual desire is male; it is intractable, uncontrollable, and victimizing (p.70).

The messages purveyed by popular culture put adolescent females under heavy pressure to develop the “acceptable” feminine identity without being victimized or labelled. They play a key role in the socialization of adolescent girls’ to the dominant ideology that sexuality is male-centred, and in which female sexuality remains silent.

1.2 - Discourse of Desire, or the Lack of It

According to Mumby (1991), discourse is the principal medium through which power relations are maintained and reproduced. Power is a pervasive characteristic of organizational life which shapes the identity of the members of a particular group. Discourse, as a structured social practice, creates meaning formations rooted in a system of presence and absence which systematically privileges and marginalizes different organizational experiences. Feminist researchers conceive language as a “symbolic reflection of andocentric structures” (Gunther & Kotthoff, 1991, p. 7, in Wodak, 1997,

p.10) as one of the means of patriarchal society to discriminate, disregard and incapacitate women. According to feminist writers, the language system already reflects the patriarchal system of western society (Wodak, 1997).

In the process of socialization and acculturation of children and adolescents to gender norms and in their culture, discourse plays a powerful medium (Sheldon, 1997). Due to the importance of discourse to the perpetuation of dominant patriarchal ideology, which, as discussed in previous section, socializes adolescent girls to view their sexuality as of inferior importance to that of boys', the examination of sexuality-related discourse is crucial. It is not only the way socio-cultural messages are transmitted (the language they use), but is also the tool used by adolescent girls to describe and explain their own sexuality.

Research on gender and sex in sociolinguistic and discourse analyses started in the early 1970s. Michelle Fine pioneered the research on the discourse of sexuality and desire among adolescent girls in her 1988 work, *Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire*. Fine analyzed the discourse used in American public schools to educate adolescents about sexuality. She concluded that the discourse that prevails in public schools is repressive of female sexual desire, promotes discourse of female victimization, and privileges heterosexuality. Fine noted that "naming of desire, pleasure, sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in the formal agenda of public schooling on sexuality (p. 35). To investigate whether and how prevalent discourses are internalized by adolescent girls, Fine also conducted a qualitative investigation of how girls talk about sexuality. The girls in her study rarely reflected simply on sexuality and talked about it in the context of their fears. They talked

about sexuality as a negotiation between sacrifice and nurturance. In conclusion, Fine writes,

Even in the absence of a discourse of desire, young women express their notions of sexuality and relate their experiences. Yet, official discourses of sexuality leave little room for such exploration. The authorized sexual discourses define what is safe, what is taboo, and what will be silenced. This discourse of sexuality miseducates adolescent women. What results is a discourse of sexuality based on the male in search of desire and the female in search for protection. (p. 45)

Later research on the discourse used by adolescent girls to in their reference to sexuality and sexual desire illuminated similar findings. Studies reveal that when girls do speak about their sexuality, they do not talk spontaneously about their own desire. For instance, Karin Martin (1996) noted that in her study of adolescent's experiences with puberty, when asked to talk about their sexual experiences, girls talked about relationships and not about sexual pleasure or desire. Similarly, Lisa Dodson (1998) who used a combination of qualitative methods to study experiences of black and white poor adolescent girls in the US noted that girls were not aware of how rarely they spoke about sexual desire or pleasure. These findings further exemplify how the "missing discourse of desire" is limiting of adolescent girls' visualization and understanding of their own sexual experiences.

Although the discourse of desire available to adolescent girls within their educational system is not the only one, Lynn Phillips (2000) posits that the discourses

available to girls within their broader social contexts are not very different. Based on a qualitative study with adolescent girls, Phillips proposed 2 different discourses for “good woman” prevalent in mainstream culture. The “pleasing woman discourse” refers to a woman who focuses on “how to get a man”, who is asexual prior to marriage, who looks good and dresses modestly, and who is concerned with the wellbeing of others. The “pleasing woman” is silencing of woman’s sexual desire and prescribes that her active sexuality is inconsistent with “normal” womanhood. The “Together Woman Discourse” portrays the good woman as being assertive, one who has unlimited possibilities and who can make free choices. This type of woman can and must “have it all” and has nothing holding her back from pleasure and fulfillment. Ironically, this discourse suggests that women need to be sexually sophisticated not for their own pleasure but as means to attract men. It suggests that in order to be desirable by men, a woman must be a sexual agent. These two discourses coexist side-by-side within mainstream culture, including adolescents’ peer groups, the media and their schools. Although on the surface, the “together woman” discourse may seem more liberating, its assumed heterosexuality and the importance of being attractive to men make this discourse as limiting and disempowering as the “pleasing woman” discourse. Although twenty years after Fine conducted her research discourse of desire and sexual freedom became more present in girls’ environments, it remains unattainable, confusing and disempowering.

1.3 - Sexual Desire from the Perspective of Adolescent Girls

In a world of silencing discourses and contradictory messages about how females ought to express and experience sexuality, how does sexuality and sexual desire emerge

and develop among adolescent girls? By asking girls to describe their experiences feminist researchers illuminated on our understanding of girls' experiences within their contexts. Across all studies, major themes voiced by adolescent girls in their accounts of their sexual experiences include fear of and confusion about their sexuality, the danger of social labelling, and the silence of sexual feelings (e.g., Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002; Wood, 2007).

The two earliest feminist qualitative attempts to explore adolescent girls' sexuality were done by Thompson (1995) and Michelle Fine (1988). Thompson collected 400 girls' narratives about sexuality, pregnancy and contraception between the years 1978 and 1986 (Thompson, 1995) in which girls' desire seems absent or not relevant to the terms of their sexual relationships. The minority of girls who spoke of sexual pleasure voiced more sexual agency than girls whose experiences were devoid of pleasure. Fine's account echoed that of Thompson; the girls in her study too rarely simply reflected on sexuality and talked about it in the context of their fears. Thompson's and Fine's findings were not focused solemnly on sexuality and sexual desire; their findings of dangerous sexual practices and silent voices suggested the need for a more focused and detailed study.

In response to the emergent need for further exploration, Deborah Tolman conducted a pioneering research on adolescent girls' sexuality and sexual desire in the early 1990's. Although she has published a number of articles and book-chapters, the most comprehensive account of this project was published in a book, *Dilemmas of Desire* (2004). Tolman's main question was "how girls who are or are becoming sexually active describe and experience their sexual desire" (p. 27). Tolman interviewed thirty-one girls

ages 15 to 18 in rural and urban areas in the US. Until present, Tolman's research remains the most comprehensive qualitative account on girls' sexual desire. I will thus review Tolman's findings in more detail than subsequent studies on the subject.

Tolman notes that participants often described their first sexual experiences using the phrase, "*it just happened*" (Tolman, 2002, p. 2); they often refrained from objecting sexual experiences because they did not believe they would be heard, or were not respected when they voiced their objection. Either way, the narrative that remains to capture girls' experiences exemplifies the learned passive desire and the loss of agency.

Tolman found that different girls experienced their sexual desire in different ways and subsequently grouped them based on the experiences they shared. A few girls in Tolman's study described what she called "silent bodies", that is, they did not exhibit "any signs of embodied sexual desire and conveyed no traceable erotic voice (Tolman, 2001, p.55). For one of the participants, sexuality is one of the most fearsome things out there and is equated with exposing herself and with the possibility of pregnancy, which would bring shame to her and her family. Another participant described her sexual experiences as follows: "if I'm with someone else, I allow them to do things to me" (p.60), exemplifying the mainstream image of females as desirable but not desiring. Another group of girls in Tolman's study described what she termed "confused bodies" (p. 47); they were not sure whether they felt sexual desire in their bodies and were unsure of how to interpret certain bodily sensations.

Girls who did identify feelings of sexual desire always discussed the need to negotiate between pleasure and danger. The desiring girls outlined a number of potential risks. They were concerned with sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, violence,

and social stigmatization. Social consequences were a particularly loaded risk; getting labelled a “slut” or a “whore” or being perceived as “easy” by peers were often mentioned and played a key role in girls’ sexual decisions. Among the desiring girls, different resolutions to the dilemma of sexuality ensued; while some girls were overpowered by fear and chose to cut desire-arousing experiences from their lives, others chose to battle the risks and act on their desires, accepting the adverse social consequences that often followed. For some of the girls within the desiring group, the dilemma of how to act on sexual desire emerged from the social pressures they felt to be in romantic relationships. They outlined that although they did not want to be in a relationship, it was the safest route for sexual exploration.

When comparing the urban and the rural girls, Tolman (1996) noted difference in how girls experienced their sexuality. When the urban girls described their response to their own sexual desire, themes of self-control, caution, and conflict predominated. They made explicit connection between their sexual desire and danger, acknowledging conflicts between their desire and their physical vulnerability to AIDS and to pregnancy, as well as their social vulnerability to getting “bad” reputation. These girls often made conscious decisions to sacrifice their pleasure to protect themselves from danger, which often led to disconnection and self-silencing. In contrast, when the suburban girls talked about their responses to sexual desire, they spoke more frequently about pursuing sexual curiosity. The conflict between safety and curiosity was expressed and resolved differently for these girls. The suburban girls’ conflict was mostly internal, between what they felt in their bodies and the cultural messages they received about appropriate female sexual behaviour. Instead of silencing their bodies, these girls described a struggle to stay

connected. In her conclusion, Tolman claims that it is the social context of the urban girls, with its dangers and stereotypes, which drives girls to self-silence their desires and trade their pleasure for a good reputation and safety.

Karin Martin (1996) conducted a qualitative study with 55 adolescent boys and girls to investigate the effects of puberty and sexuality on the development of adolescent self-esteem. Based on her research she claimed that the cultural meaning of puberty and sexuality plays a key role in adolescents' view of self. According to Martin, girls speak of sexual desire only in the context of true love. Furthermore, when asked to talk about sexual experiences, girls often talk about relationships and not about sexual pleasure. For girls in Martin's study, "being ready" for sexual experiences was based on whether the girl was with the "right person" rather than on girls' sexual feelings (p. 76). Similarly to Tolman's findings, adolescent girls in this study viewed a romantic relationship as a safe context for sexual experiences and have internalized the cultural messages around the silence of female's desire. Further, the girls explained that agreeing to have sex was often because girls did not want the boys to get mad or leave them, which further echoes the trade-off girls face between safety, social image, and personal desire. Although Martin's research was not focused on how adolescents experience desire, her findings that desire plays little role in girls' decisions to engage in sexual behaviour exemplifies how adolescent girls self-silence their sexual feelings and desires.

Lyn Phillips (2000) conducted a qualitative study with thirty undergraduate women to further investigate the duality of sexuality in girls' and young women's lives. The narratives of Phillips' participants gave voice to four conflicting discourses of "good" womanhood, "normal" male sexuality, "real" victimization, and "typical"

heterosexual relationships (p. 37), which mirror the contradictory messages emitted by the mainstream culture. A “good woman” is either a “pleasing woman” who is pleasant, feminine, subordinate to men, not desiring, or the more contemporary “together woman”, who is sexually free and sophisticated. “Normal” heterosexual males are either “good” or “bad”, “normal” or “dangerous” (p. 52). “Male sexual drive” is a natural drive that is inherently compelling and aggressive in its quest for fulfillment (p.57). And, lastly, heterosexuality leads inevitably to a “disaster”, whether through disease, pregnancy, rape, or loss of self-respect (p.61).

For Phillips’ participants, hetero-relations are representations of struggle with constructed concepts of adulthood, agency, danger and desire. Hetero-relations challenge young women to negotiate continuously across multiple dimensions of power – to experience themselves as both actor and acted upon, as potential adult subject and possible gendered object.

Young women, who were socialized to these contradictory narratives, were in constant negotiation between pressures. Phillips suggests that her participants did not simply face discreet situations, rather they were involved in an ongoing social and developmental process, constructing intricate strategies for making their way through conflicting ideas and provocative dilemma about maturity, gender, power, and women’s and men’s entitlement and responsibility to themselves and each other. Phillips points out that women constantly “monitor” themselves to try and figure out who they are, and “who to be”. They constantly monitor the contradictory expectations and the harsh judgements about their character and status as young women. The participants in Phillips’

study repeatedly voiced concern for being perceived as sluts if they voiced their needs and desires to their partners.

Phillips observed that each young woman devises a unique set of strategies to negotiate her way through and around encounters marked by ambiguity and mixed emotions, which are important for the young woman's ability to maintain a sense of control in the situations that threatened their sense of agency.

Young women who were connected to and wanted to act on their sexual desire often needed to justify their entitlement for sexual pleasure. Phillips described three main strategies women used to for making an entrance into hetero-relations they desired, and which allowed them create a sense of entitlement. Young women either "chose to put themselves in situations" where sex could "just happen" (p.116), did "everything but" having sexual intercourse (p. 120), or chose to be "Bad Girls" (unapologetically sexual) (p. 123).

The studies discussed in this section greatly contributed to the understanding of adolescent girls' and young women's experiences with their sexualities. I have chosen to review these particular studies because they most closely resemble my proposed project, of which I will elaborate in the following section. What is important to highlight at this point is the interesting way the research I have reviewed converges. Although each researcher had a different research question at the outset of their project, findings on the dilemmas faced by adolescent females are similar. What is also interesting is the power of context and age; not only did Tolman find differences among urban and rural girls, Phillips' account on how dilemmas of desire are "solved" differed from that of Tolman's. More of the girls' who participated in Tolman's project talked of silenced feelings and

fear of sexuality whereas more of the participants in Phillip's project were aware of and acted on their desire. One possible explanation could be the age difference between the two groups. This difference, which may be attributed to other factors as well, points to the importance of integration of the immediate as well as the broader contexts into the investigation of adolescent sexuality as well as to the need to research younger females.

1.4 - The Present Study

Female sexuality has been the subject of interest in western culture. Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time for the development of sexuality and its integration into the individual's sense of self (Martin, 1996); it is the age at which boys and girls experiment with their sexuality and are socialized to the messages of the mainstream culture. The dominating cultural norms convey various contradictory messages about how females "should" experience and express their sexuality via mainstream media mediums as well as via the creation and maintenance of discourses. Adolescent girls are told that "good girls are not sexual". Girls who are sexual are either (1) "bad girls", if they have been active, desiring sexual agents or (2) good girls, who have been passively victimized by boys' raging hormones (Tolman, 1996). Further, girls are told to silence their sexual desire in order to be desirable for boys (Tolman, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that in a culture full of contradictory demands on girls' sexuality research on girls' narratives about their sexuality and desire reflects that girls grapple with contradictory expectation, having internalized these messages.

Although past research on adolescent sexuality and sexual desire has generated a significant body of knowledge, further investigation is required. What are girls' initial

experiences with sexuality? How do girls' sexual feelings and experiences with sexuality change over time? What are some protective factors that help girls resist the pressures and remain connected to their sexual feelings? And what role does the girls' immediate familial and social context play in the development of sexuality? By taking a life-history prospective approach and analysing narratives of younger adolescent girls, I wish to answer some of these questions.

In addition to my interest in examining the development of girls' sexual experiences over time, I believe that taking a prospective approach will enhance the depth of the narratives shared by the participants in the present study. Given their early age, I suspect that girls may be more inhibited to talk about sexuality during their initial interviews. By taking a longitudinal perspective I hope to overcome this obstacle. I believe that familiarity with the interviewer may encourage girls to reveal more personal and meaningful experience and thoughts, which will result in a more accurate reflection of their experiences and, consequently, further the understanding of girls' experiences with their sexual feelings.

CHAPTER II

Methodology

2.1 - Qualitative Research

The present inquiry will be using a longitudinal qualitative methods for exploring interviews of 9 post-pubescent girls, ages 13 to 17; in particular, it will be examining their narratives related to sexual experiences, connection with sexual desire, social and familial pressures around sexuality, and protective factors that help girls resist socio-cultural pressures. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there appears to be a lack of qualitative research exploring this topic with younger adolescent girls using a longitudinal qualitative approach.

Qualitative research has been equated to systematic discovery as its purpose is to generate knowledge by understanding what social events and processes mean to people and by exploring people's interactions with and interpretation of each other as well as the world around them (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005). It is concerned with the complexity of everyday social interactions and with the meaning people attribute to them (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Some of the strengths of qualitative research methods include their quest for deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study; their ability to look at the way social interactions are enacted in their natural settings (Silverman, 2000); the holistic view of social phenomena; and the insight into the meanings of decisions and actions (Ulin et al., 2005).

Research questions used for data collection in qualitative studies are usually open ended and exploratory in nature (Miles & Gilbert, 2005). One of the main data collection tools in qualitative research is the interview, which assesses the respondents'

“perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality” (Punch, 1998, pp. 174-5). Miles and Gilbert (2005) argued that what makes each interview unique is every participant’s experiences and his or her ability to communicate these experiences. They also stated that in qualitative research the power is given to the respondents, who are made into co-researchers, which empowers them to point out important aspects of the phenomenon as they see it. Miles and Gilbert point out the importance of sampling broadly and interviewing in depth to capture all the essential aspects and variations of the phenomenon.

The importance of context in qualitative research has been repeatedly pointed out. It was argued that human actions are influenced by the setting in which they occur (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), and that in order to convey the full picture context must be considered (Punch, 1998). Ulin et al. (2005) argued that context is not only the physical setting, but also “the historical, social, and political climates and the organizational or individual characteristics that influence that phenomenon” (p. 140). They stated that a social phenomenon could never be understood outside of its context. They also encouraged bringing context into analysis by reflecting on the larger picture, which includes the influence of the respondents’ social position, economic opportunities, and religious beliefs on their stories.

2.2 - Analyzing Qualitative Data

Data analysis has been described as “the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to a mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 154). In qualitative research the investigator is dividing the data into distinctive meaning units,

which convey meaning to the reader even when they are standing out of the context (Miles & Gilbert, 2005). The process of attaching labels to sections of data is called coding and it allows the researcher to group and compare related pieces of information (Ulin et al., 2005). The units of analysis can be identified by way of being numerous; by being absent despite the fact that it would be reasonable to expect them to be included; and by being explicitly mentioned by the research participants (LeCompte, 2000). According to LeCompte (2000), the units of analysis are compared and contrasted, and those items that go together are clumped in one group to create categories. The categories that fit together in a meaningful way are in turn making up patterns, which begin to explain or describe the whole phenomenon.

Qualitative analysis requires flexibility in order to develop procedures in response to the ongoing analysis (Miles & Gilbert, 2005). In other words, the methodology used in the analysis is emergent in that it changes depending on what is found in the data to be able to organize the data most efficiently. While the researcher is guided by initial concepts, he or she modifies that initial understanding as the data is being analyzed (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

When interpreting qualitative data the researcher is looking for the simplest way to fully characterize the phenomenon by finding categories that are sufficient to communicate its essence (Miles & Gilbert, 2005). The interpretation brings meaning and coherence to all the themes and patterns that have been identified and develops a story line that is sensible and engaging to read (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

2.3 - Life History Approach

The present inquiry will be using the life history approach for exploring adolescent girls' attitudes, feelings, and behaviours associated with weight, eating, and dieting. This approach is well suited for this type of inquiry as it provides access to contextual data that helps to explain how and why things happened in the past and how they might be affecting the present (Haglund, 2004). In addition, Haglund (2004) found that this approach works well with adolescents as they already have such skills as insight, recall, interest, and the ability to think abstractly, which makes them developmentally capable of participating in a life history study.

Life history approach is one of the many approaches within qualitative research. This approach gathers, analyzes, and interprets the stories that people tell about their lives (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). It also facilitates the study of phenomena that develop over time in response to a variety of influences (Haglund, 2004). According to Cole and Knowles (2001), life history approach is based on the assumption that the general can be understood by analyzing the particular, meaning that by understanding the experiences of one person the researcher gains insight into the lives of other people within that community. It provides insight into the way people learn to meet society's normative expectations, such as those related to gender, social class, and age, as well as the way people create meaning within the culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Cole and Knowles (2001) emphasize the importance of in-depth understanding of the context in life history research, highlighting the fact that people's lives are never lived in complete isolation from social context. Haglund (2004) supports that claim, arguing that context is critical to understanding a person's life, because it influences how that

person's life is lived and interpreted, which in turn filters and assigns meaning to events, thoughts, experiences, and relationships of that person.

Researchers who use life history approach guide their respondents through their life histories by prompting memories and encouraging reflections, interpretations, and insights (Haglund, 2004). They view the respondents as collaborative partners who are involved in the process of exploration, discovery, and understanding. Life history researchers try to create a conversational space where the phenomenon under study can be discussed and try to figure out together with the participants how this process should unfold (Cole & Knowles, 2001). In that way they are challenging the traditional notions of hierarchy and power in research.

2.4 - Data Collection Method

In order to recruit participants for the study, advertisements were posted in community settings in Toronto, Ontario; Kemptville, Ontario; and Winnipeg, Manitoba. Girls who wished to participate in the first phase of the study needed to be of either pre-pubescent age (9 to 11 years old) or post-pubescent age (13 to 14 years old); needed to provide their assent; and needed to be enrolled in a public or private school. Parental consent was also required. A total of 27 girls were interviewed four times over a course of four years as part of a larger qualitative study. The present inquiry used sections of 18 interviews of nine adolescent girls interviewed in wave two and three of the study. The sections it used were related to sexual experiences, desire and social context of sexual development. The sample included girls from both urban and rural communities, as well as different social locations in terms of socioeconomic status and ethno-cultural group

membership. There was also diversity in the family make-up of the participants, including married, divorced, and remarried parents and step-parents, as well as different numbers of siblings and step-siblings. All the participants attended public schools at the time they were interviewed.

The participants were interviewed in their homes if a quiet and private space was available; otherwise they were interviewed at the local community centre or in the interviewer's office. All the interviews were tape-recorded. The interviewers used an interview guide, which included open-ended questions using the life history format. They inquired regarding the girls' body and self experiences in a variety of socio-cultural contexts beginning with their earlier childhood memories and leading to their recent experiences. Following the completion of the interviews the participants received a \$10 gift certificate to a local music store or a bookstore.

2.5 - Participants

Following are brief descriptions of the nine post-pubescent girls and their family situations that will provide some context for their narratives.

2.5.1 - Kelly

Kelly was 14 years old at the time of the second interview, just beginning grade 9, and 17 years old during her third interview, in the middle of grade 11. She lives with her mother, stepfather, and three of her five sisters, one of which is her twin sister, in Winnipeg, MB. Kelly and her twin sister are the youngest of the five girls in their family. Her father was born in Portugal and her mother was born in Canada. Her mother

completed up to grade 10 in school, and her father quit school after grade five in order to work. Her father immigrated to Canada in his twenties where he soon met and married her mother. Kelly's parents separated after twelve years of marriage when she was quite young. Her mother (and all five sisters) eventually moved in with the man she is currently in a relationship with. She works at the nearby school helping out over the lunch hour. Her stepfather works as a mechanic. Kelly's family's socioeconomic status is lower-middle class. Kelly visits her dad one weekend a month and then spends a few weeks with him in the summer. Her father remarried shortly after his divorce from her mother and Kelly became quite close with her stepmother and her new stepbrother and stepsister. A few years ago, her father and stepmother divorced. Kelly states that this was quite a difficult period for her. He is now in a new relationship with a woman who has two young sons. Her father works both as a house painter and in a cafeteria at a hospital. Her oldest sister has graduated from high school and moved out. She is currently working and has plans of eventually working as an educational assistant. Her other two sisters have both dropped out of high school and are working full time. Kelly enjoys school and has goals of one day going to university to become an elementary school teacher. Kelly enjoys playing soccer and hanging out with her cousin and her close friends. With regards to Kelly's dating experiences, at the time of her second and third interviews Kelly is dating the same boy, who is four years older than her. She reported being happy in the relationship on both interviews. During the second interview Kelly reported that she and her boyfriend did not have sexual intercourse; however, during the third interview Kelly reported that they had sex shortly before the second interview but that she was embarrassed to talk about her experience.

2.5.2 - *Lauren*

Lauren lives in Toronto with her mother, father and older brother. She was 15 years old at the time of the second interview and 17 years old at the time of the third interview. Lauren was half way through grade 10 during the second interview and half way through grade 12 during the third interview. Lauren's mother and father were both born in Ontario and have always lived in southern Ontario. Their family's cultural heritage is a mixture of English, Irish and Scottish. Lauren's mother works as a secretary for a medical group and her father works as a technician for a large communications company. Both of her parents graduated from high school and then received training for their current jobs. Her family's socioeconomic status is middle class. Lauren's brother is sixteen years old and attends the same public high school as Lauren. Lauren describes a close relationship with her brother and states they spend a lot of social time together with mutual friends. Lauren is and has always been very involved in sports and athletics. She also enjoys school and works hard to get good grades so that she can attend university one day. With regards to her experiences with dating and sexuality, Lauren had her first boyfriend in grade eight and she had a number of dating relationships prior to her second interview. During her third interview Lauren reported having a relationship with a boy but she does not label the relationship as a dating one. During the third interview Lauren did not report becoming sexually active.

2.5.3 - *Brady*

Brady was 14 years old at the time of the second interview and half way through grade 9 at a Winnipeg public high school. She was 16 years old during the third

interview. She lives with her mother, father and two brothers. Brady's mother works as a registered nurse and her father works as a mechanic. Brady did not know exactly the level of education received by her parents, but knows her mom received training from a nursing program. Although Brady's family would be considered middle class, she lives and attends school in a very working class area. Brady's ethno-cultural heritage is German. Brady has one older brother who was 16 and one younger brother who was 11 at the time of the second interview. She stated that she and her older brother do not get along very well anymore but she still does get along with her younger brother. Brady insisted on going to a different public school than both of her brothers. She enjoys playing sports and currently plays hockey in the winter and soccer in the summer. With regards to her experiences with dating and sexuality, Brady started dating her first boyfriend shortly after the second interview and reported dating the same boy during the third interview. During the third interview Brady did not report becoming sexually active.

2.5.4 - Jenna

Jenna grew up in a small rural French town in Southern Manitoba. Jenna was 13 years old at the time of the second interview half way through grade 8 and 15 years old during her third interview studying in grade 10. Jenna lives with her parents and one of her brothers on her family's farm. Her parents are both farmers. Jenna's family is in the middle class level for socioeconomic status. Her family's heritage is French-Canadian with French as their first language. Her older sister was 23, her oldest brother was 22, and her next brother was 14 at the time of the second interview. Her older brother is living in Winnipeg attending university. Jenna's older sister currently lives in another town and is

working as a teacher. The school in the town she lives in is a francophone school, but Jenna and her family wanted her to attend an English/French immersion school. In order to be at a school that is both English and French, Jenna attends school in the next closest town. The school Jenna attends hosts kindergarten through to grade 12. She takes most of her classes in French with a couple of courses in English. Jenna plays on two different hockey teams – one is primarily boys, with Jenna and one other girl on the team; and the other is an all-girls' team. Jenna is also involved in baseball, basketball, and volleyball at her school. When she's not busy with her sports, Jenna enjoys spending time with her friends at each other's houses or going to the movies. With regards to her experiences with dating and sexuality, Jenna started dating in grade 8 and reported that her first few relationships were not different from friendships. Jenna reported that most of her boyfriends were boys she was friends with on her hockey team. During the third interview Jenna was dating a boy from school. She reported that this relationship is different from a friendship but refused to elaborate about whether she became sexually active or not.

2.5.5 - Jessica

Jessica was 13 at the time of the second interview and half way through grade 8 at a public middle school. She was 15 years old during the second interview and studying in grade 10. Jessica's family heritage is primarily Scottish with a mixture of French, German, Welsh, Hungarian and Romanian. Jessica lives in Winnipeg with her mother, her stepfather, and her baby sister. Jessica's mother was born in Ontario but has lived in Winnipeg most of her life. Upon completion of high school, she attended university to

attain her Bachelor's degree in Social Work and she now works as a social worker at a social service agency in Winnipeg. Jessica's stepfather also works as a social worker in the same agency. Her family's socioeconomic status would be lower-middle class, but they live in a primarily working class neighbourhood. Jessica's father lives in Winnipeg with his partner, her 13-year-old son and their 7-year-old son. Jessica's father completed high school and now works in a restaurant. Jessica describes that she is not very close with her father and only sees him one day out of every couple of weeks. Jessica's mother and stepfather have a one-year-old baby together and Jessica states that she really enjoys her younger sister and helps out quite a bit when needed. Jessica enjoys reading magazines, shopping, and hanging out with her group of friends. With regards to her sexual and dating experiences, Jessica was dating a boy from her class during the second interview; during the third interview she described this relationship as a friendship. During the third interview Jessica reported that she had a boyfriend, after having dated two other boys before the current one. During the third interview Jessica did not report becoming sexually active.

2.5.6 - Melissa

At 14 years old, Melissa part way through grade 9 at the time of the second interview. She was 16 years old and in grade 11 during the third interview. Melissa lives in a small rural town just outside of Winnipeg, MB. She lives with her parents and her two sisters. Melissa's mother was born in a small town in Manitoba and her father was born in Minnesota. Melissa's family ethno-cultural heritage is Ukrainian and English. Melissa's mother graduated from high school and went on to complete her training to

become a registered nurse. Her father also graduated from high school, completed some university, and now owns his own automotive company. Her family's socioeconomic status is upper-middle class. One of Melissa's sisters is 15 years old and the other sister is 10 years old. Melissa has always attended school in the rural town she lives in, but is attending a high school in the city of Winnipeg. Melissa has always been very involved in sports and the outdoors. She plays ringette and soccer and is on the school's basketball and volleyball teams. With regards to her sexual and dating experiences, Melissa dated a few boys prior to the second interview; during the second interview she reported being disinterested in dating relationships. During the third interview Melissa reports that she has seen a few boys from school and that she was seeing a boy at the time. During the third interview Melissa did not report becoming sexually active.

2.5.7 - Kyra

Kyra was 13 years old at the time of the second interview and is part way through grade 8. During the third interview Kyra was 16 years old and is in grade 11. Kyra is Caucasian and she was born in Canada. Her family has been in Canada for at least three generations. Kyra was born in Kingston Ontario. Her mother, who lives on a working hobby farm, shares custody with her stepfather and Kyra and her sister go back and forth frequently. Kyra is not in touch with her biological father; she has not seen him since she was two years old. Her family's socioeconomic status is middle class. Her mother works in a healthcare agency and her stepfather works as an engineer. Kyra does not get along very well with her younger sister and they fight often. Kyra has a few close friends, both, boys and girls, and she spends time with them. With regards to her sexual and dating

experiences, Kyra dated at least one boy prior to the second interview but reported being disinterested in dating relationships during the second interview. During the third interview she was dating a boy with whom she has been together for nearly a year. Kyra's boyfriend is also present during the third interview and is occasionally quoted in the present study. During the third interview Kyra and her boyfriend reported having become sexually active.

2.5.8 - Sarah

Sarah was 15 years old at the time of the second interview and was attending grade 9. During the second interview she was 17 years old and just completed grade 11. She lives in a rural town in Ontario with her parents and her brother. The socioeconomic status of her family is middle class. She is Caucasian and was born in Canada. Her mother was also born in Canada and her father was born in a South Asian country, although his heritage is not South Asian. Her father has been in the military for over 20 years and her mother runs a small store. As a child, Sarah and her family moved a lot inside and outside of Canada due to the father's military duties. Sarah enjoys spending time with her family. She and her mother used to be very close but their relationship became more complicated through the years. Sarah has a few very close friends and she enjoys spending time with them. She also plays Hockey; during the second interview she played hockey on the boy's team and during the third interview she played hockey on the girls' team. With regards to her sexual and dating experiences, during the second interview Sarah reported having a friend with whom she had sex for the first time shortly prior to the interview. During the third interview Sarah reported that she had a number of

boyfriends and sexual partners since the prior interview and that she was in an undefined sexual relationship with a boy at the time of the interview.

2.5.9 - Shannon

Shannon was 14 years old at the time of the second interview and was studying in grade 10. During the second interview Shannon was 17 years old and had just finished grade 12. She lives in a rural town in Ontario with her parents and her brother. The socioeconomic status of her family is middle class. Shannon was born in Canada and she is Caucasian. Her mother works with children and her father is an engineering technologist. Shannon's mother attended post-secondary education and nearly finished a diploma programme and her father obtained a diploma. Shannon likes playing hockey and has been playing hockey since elementary school. With regards to her sexual and dating experiences, during the second and the third interviews Shannon reported that she never dated boys and had no sexual experiences, although in both interviews she stated being interested in having a boyfriend.

2.6 - Data analysis methods

All the interviews were transcribed and imported into QSR N6, which is a program for analyzing qualitative data. Identifying information was removed from the transcripts and each girl's name was replaced with a research name that she chose. As the present inquiry aims to examine the girls' experiences with sexuality in their social contexts, sections of the interviews of the girls that are related to sexuality will be

analyzed for themes. Analysis emergent methodology will be used that will be adapting to the findings emerging from the data.

A coding tree will be created, which will contain the themes commonly identified by the literature as well as the themes frequently repeated in the girls' narratives. The relevant sections of the interviews will then be coded into the aforementioned coding tree. Following that, related groups of items will be examined in order to identify patterns, which would help to explain in a meaningful way all the sexuality-related comments as a whole.

CHAPTER III

Results

Girls' stories revealed that there are a number of different types of relationships in which girls and boys may engage, including dating/going out, which entails commitment, seeing someone, which officially entails no or very little commitment, and having friends with whom they engage in sexual activities, which too entails no commitment. I have termed the partner in the latter type as a "play-friend". Some of the girls also described themselves as wanting a boyfriend but never having had one. Girls' experiences with sexuality are nested within these various relationships. Further, these relationships are nested in and affected by the broader social context in which each relationship is embedded. In order to observe temporal changes in girls' social settings as well as girls' experiences within them, I will first discuss themes that emerged from the second wave of interviews and will continue with the discussion of themes emergent from the third wave, commenting on the change in themes between earlier and later interviews.

From the interviews it appeared that peers, family members, and the partners themselves played the most important roles in girls' relationships and in their sexual experiences; girls mentioned peers and family members most frequently and often linked their decisions about relationships and sexuality to peers, their family members and their partners. In examining girls' social settings, I will thus first discuss girls' peer and friend groups, then proceed to the examination of families, and then examine girls' experiences within relationships with their various partners.

3.1 - 2nd Wave of Interviews

3.1.1 - Peers / Friends

3.1.1.1 - Sexual labelling among peers: Are you a Whore/Slut?

Practically all girls reported the use of sexually derogatory labels such as ‘whore’ and ‘slut’ by their peers which most girls reported to be used in varied contexts. Girls also mentioned labels such as ‘easy’ and ‘tight’ which were used more narrowly, only in relation to sexual behaviour.

3.1.1.1.1 - What gets a girl labelled?

There were slight differences in what girls reported to lead to sexual labelling. When asked about what kinds of behaviours differentiate a ‘slut’ from a ‘non-slut’ Lauren talked about girls’ sexual experiences.

Umm, girls that are very [slutty], they do stuff with guys that just most other people wouldn’t, like just stuff that isn’t really necessary; they’ll do anything for attention. (*Oral sex or?*) Oh yeah, all that kind of stuff, they’ll do all that stuff that other girls are kind of like, okay. They’re easy.

According to Lauren, sexual experiences are motivated by attention seeking; ‘slutty’ girls engage in “unnecessary” sexual behaviours not out of sexual pleasure but out of need for boys’ attention. Lauren further explains,

They just start becoming very attention needing from boys and then they just start you know, rumours start about them that they're doing stuff and usually those rumours are true and I don't know. (*And do dress differently or behave differently?*) Uh, huh, they're girly girls and they dress very provocative. They wear like the low pants and belly tops and stuff like that and the make up and stuff like that.

In Lauren's social peer group, attention seeking behaviour is not only associated with engaging in sexual activities with boys but is also communicated through revealing clothing. Lauren explains that sexually 'promiscuous' girls who are labelled 'sluts' are also subject to rumours about their behaviours. Brady tells a relatively similar story about what results in girls' labelling.

(*Ok. So what would be kind of labels that come up for girls your age now?*) I don't know, practically just sluts and whores and that. (*Really. So what makes somebody fall into those categories?*) Dressing really sluttyish. (*Yeah, so showing a lot of skin or...*) [Nod, yes] (*Ok. And does it have anything to do with their actions or anything or is it just about clothing?*) No, like they go and they like, grind with guys in the hallway and do things like that.

Like Lauren, Brady reports that in her social context if girls dress in revealing clothes and/or if they engage in certain activities with boys they are likely to get labelled. When Kelly is asked about labelling of girls in her school, she avoids repeating the

labels. She explains that in her school there is a number of ways a girl can get a negative reputation.

(So once a girl has a reputation you said some girls can get a reputation that they're loose if they, so how does a girl get that reputation? Does she actually have to do things with the guys or?) Well some people just call a girl, a rude name because the way they dress. Like if they're dressing really open and stuff then they automatically get the name.

Kelly explains that provocative, or revealing, clothing can result in sexualized labelling. When Kelly is queried about what having sexual feelings mean to her she says,

I don't know. Like I know if you don't do anything people will say oh you're tight or something. Or if you do lots of stuff, they say, they call you rude names. they say oh they're really loose. Or something. I've heard that a lot.

Interestingly, Kelly equates the presence and absence of sexual feelings with sexual behaviours, which, in turn, automatically lead to labelling. Kelly's comment highlights the complexity of the context some girls grow up in; if mere sexual feelings are perceived to lead to sexual labelling it is understandable why such feelings may be perceived as threatening and why some girls may display a lack of connection with their own feelings, as will be discussed later on. Kelly is further queried about sexual feelings.

(Right. So, having, like say, if a girl has sexual feelings does that mean she wants to have sex or does that mean she's interested in sex or that she thinks about sex. What do you think sexual feelings mean?) I don't know. Like the way people say it, they make it sound so bad, but I don't, I don't know.

Kelly, who has been dating a boy for over a year at the time of this interview, indicates that her perception of what sexual feelings are and what they mean is affected by sexualized labelling that she is exposed to in her school. Sarah portrays a rather different picture about what leads to sexual labelling of girls in her school.

In our school you are only a slut if you brag. Like to absolutely ever because my friend J(girl's name) moved ... she was like everyone knew her you know she was "The Slut". I mean she even said it herself, she is like "I'm such a slut, I can't help it" whatever, you know. So she admitted herself basically and like she but she went to even people that she wouldn't know and tell them all this stuff and she, she would hit on the people she didn't know and she just met and she would be like "Hey what's up" you know.

Sarah reports that girls can engage in sexual activities with boys and remain label-free if they keep their experiences secret. Telling others about one's experiences, however, results in labelling. A fine line appears to distinguish between acceptable behaviours and behaviours that may lead to labelling. What is acceptable to wear and what is too revealing? What sexual behaviours are acceptable and which are 'slutty'?

How many people is it acceptable to tell and how many is too much? Who is safe to tell to and who isn't? These fine differences in girls' behaviour reveal the complexity of the social rules around sexual labelling girls face in their peer groups.

3.1.1.1.2 - Consequences of labelling

Most of the girls described the consequences of being labelled. A label appeared to affect girls' dating and sexual relationships, the way they are perceived by their peers, and their friendships. Kyra describes one such girl in her school. When explaining why this girl would agree to date a younger boy Kyra says,

Like the only reason why N(girl's name) would go out with him (Kyra's ex-boyfriend) is because she can't get anybody in high school because they all think she is a whore (*Got it, alright. Yeah.*) And I think he is going out with her because he wants to get screwed.

From Kyra's story it appears that a girl with a label is not desired by boys in her grade and is seen inferior to them. Furthermore, she is looked down upon by other people, like Kyra, who accept the label. Brady too highlights that boys are not interested in girls who were labelled.

(Do they [labelled girls] attempt to get guys' attention, those girls?) Not really, cause the guys don't like it, because they're like, too whorish for them.

Both, Kyra and Brady point out to girls' paradoxical situation. Girls who engage in sexual activities with boys become labelled by their peer groups and are consequently looked down upon by both, girls and boys. Melissa, on the other hand, states that labelled girls are pursued by boys and points to the implication of a label on the pressures girls face from boys.

(Do you think that people, do you think boys especially, expect her to do that, like she's done it once.) Yeah, once they heard that she's done it before then they expect her to do it again. *(Why do you think that is?)* Because they think, oh well she's easy. If he can get her, I can get her.

According to Melissa, a 'loose' girl becomes a target of pressure for sexual behaviour from boys, who expect her to engage in sexual behaviours with them regardless of her own wants and needs. Thus, with every sexual experience a girl engages in, the pressure for more experiences escalates as other boys see the girl as a potential partner. This explains why some girls point out to the irreversibility of labels, as will be discussed later on; whether out of her own desire or due to pressures, if a girl engages in a sexual activity once, she is expected to continue engaging in this activity, resulting in increased pressure and in the continuity of her label.

Kelly discusses her own experiences with being labelled,

(Is there kind of more the norm, like do most girls only like to go so far or) Yeah.

Well I'll only like kiss him. That's pretty much as far as I'll go, and then they'll be all like, oh you're so tight and everything, and I'm like well yeah, I guess I am, I don't care. *(Yeah. So who is it that called you tight, boys or girls?)* Sometimes both.

Kelly's experience further complicates the already complicated social context girls live in. Not being "sexual enough" also results in a label and is not approved by peers. Although Kelly manages to separate from the label and remain in her comfort zone without giving in to pressure, other comments by Kelly highlight that she is struggling and does not often act in accordance to her sexual feelings. All girls who talked about the consequences of sexual labelling portrait the existence of contradictory messages aimed at girls, leaving very little safe space between 'tight' and 'slut' for sexual experiences. Sexual labels may lead some boys to be disinterested in labelled girls whereas others may become increasingly interested in them, expecting them to engage in sexual behaviours with them too.

3.1.1.1.3 - Boys vs. Girls: Double standard

Most of the girls pointed out that although boys are as sexually active as are girls, the consequences they face are rather different. Shannon points out that the message about sexual interest of boys and girls is different.

(Do you think it is different for boys than it is for girls, to have like sexual feelings about relationships?) Well you hear a lot about guys wanting to have girls.

Shannon concludes that boys are more interested in girls because she hears more boys talking about sexuality. Shannon also points out those boys who engage in sexual activities are judged differently than girls.

(How are guys with you? To are at least what do people think are like being sexual or ...) Ahhh, I think guys see them as like cool (*O.K.*) And then if a girl did that she would be a tramp.

Thus, the underlying social message in Shannon's context is that boys have more sexual feelings and that it is more acceptable for boys to act on these feelings than it is for girls. Kyra too points out to this double standard. After describing what would lead to girl's labelling as a 'whore' she says,

(Oh O.K. Would it be different if a guy slept with 15 different girls? What would he be called?) A player

Like Shannon, Kyra describes that while sexually active girls are being called derogatory names and not seen as desirable partners and friends, boys are praised and rewarded. Kyra also describes the effect of labelling on the interrelationship between 'players' and 'sluts'.

(Like are they [guys] looked down upon if they want to do stuff or no?) No. Well I suppose they, well for a guy it's looked upon like "Oh she will screw me" so let's go for her *(Right, how do other girls look at it?)* Whore!

According to Kyra, a girl with a label such a 'slut' or a 'whore' will be likely pursued by a 'player' for his sexual pleasure. The consequence of such sexual encounter would have differential consequences for the girl and for the boy. This implication is emphasized by Melissa,

(So I always find this interesting because guys pressure girls to do more...) And then they call them 'slut', and then the more the guy does, the better he is. He's not called a slut or anything.

Melissa points out the very core of the contradictory message echoed by all girls; that the consequences of being a sexually active for girls and boys are fundamentally different. She then goes on to state the implication of such messages on her own decision-making about sexuality.

Yeah. So like they don't do anything, they're bad. And if they do something they're bad so. I'd rather not do anything.

Melissa is able to acknowledge that it is hard to get away from sexual labelling and that anything a girl does can result in some label. Out of this insight she makes a decision based on that she wants, choosing to put up with a label if she has to.

Very few girls mentioned derogatory labels used against sexually “promiscuous” boys. Lauren described the labelling of both, boys and girls, and the implications of labelling on girls’ and boys’ relationships.

(Okay, umm what about boys who have sex or are very sexually active, what kind of labels do they get?) Do you really wanna know [laughter]? ...like but if they do it with every girl they meet like at parties and stuff, then they get names. *(Bad names or good names?)* Bad names [laughter]. *(Like those girls and other boys or just that girl?)* You usually just that girl. *(Okay, tell me about that?)* Some guys, you know if – like some of my guy friends they’d be like oh yeah that guy oh yes and they’d be like yeah, I know [laughter]. *(What names do they get called, dirty or ?)* Man whore. *(Okay.)* That’s usually what you call them, stuff like that and girls just get called slutty and stuff like that, easy, and but usually like the sluts and the man whores end up together, so whatever.

Although Lauren points out elsewhere that boys are not judged as harshly as girls for being sexually active, it important to note that in some peer groups boys too face negative social consequences. Of course, the label ‘man whore’ is loaded in of itself, in that a ‘whore’ must be a female and needs to be qualified if used against males. But the

idea that peer groups vary in their pressures and that in some contexts the double standard is more salient than others is important.

3.1.1.1.4 - Deserving the label

Interestingly, although most girls expressed objection to the double standard and some stated that girls and boys should be treated equally (neither should “sleep around” or both should do whatever they want without being labelled) some girls justified the use of labelling towards some girls, blaming them for being labelled. Lauren acknowledges the inequality but justifies some of the labelling.

(So what do you think about that so that girls can get labelled quicker than guys can?) Well, it’s not good, I mean everything should be equal but it’s not and I guess it depends, I don’t know, I think it’s a lot of girls deserve it, a lot of guys deserve it but don’t get labelled but I think a lot of girls do try harder than the boys do sort of, so the deserve it more than them.

Interestingly, although Lauren advocates for equality, her approval of labelling in some contexts reveals that she also holds certain beliefs about what sexual behaviours are and are not appropriate. Girls and boys who try to get each other’s attention in order to initiate sexual relationships should both be labelled, according to Lauren. Though sexual relationships which originate from pressure are certainly problematic, Lauren does not acknowledge the possibility that some relationships may originate from boys’ and girls’ mutual sexual interests and feelings. Sarah too believes in equality. However, despite her

belief, Sarah thinks that a girl who is labelled a “slut” holds responsibility for the label.

When talking about the girl in her grade who was labelled a ‘slut’ Sarah says:

So she put herself in that spot you know O.K. ...She is the only person I know of like in my grade she was “The Person” the only person that was ever made fun of for something like that and she kind of brought it upon herself, I mean like it stays, most of the stuff stays between the girls.

According to Sarah, although boys and girls should be equal, there is a limit to equality and to freedom of activities. If a girl acts outside of what is socially acceptable in Sarah’s context she still deserves the label and is responsible for getting it. In Sarah’s example, if a girl knows that “bragging” about one’s sexual experiences results in labelling and one “brags” more than everyone else, she is held responsible.

The realities portrayed by girls in relation to social messages about sexual experiences are more similar than different and are equally confusing. A fine line distinguishes a “tight” girl from a “loose” one and at times, this line is quite invisible. Furthermore, while boys and girls are sexually active together, the consequences are opposite and irreversible. Further, labelled girls are not only held responsible for their labels but are also subject to increased pressures and additional social scrutiny. It is thus not surprising that when talking about sexual feelings, girls’ entitlement for desire and girls’ decision-making about their own sexuality girls tell confused stories, as will be discussed later on.

3.1.1.2 - Rumours and lies as means to hurt and revenge

Some girls in the study described the use of rumours, particularly false rumours, as a widely spread tool to hurt or revenge others. Most girls related that the content of common rumours is sexual in nature and that rumours tend to affect girls' various relationships and their feelings and can affect the use and implication of sexual labels.

Kyra has been a victim to a false rumour which she speculates was spread by the ex-girlfriend of her ex-boyfriend. The content of the rumour was that she had sex with her ex-boyfriend when they were dating. Although Kyra states that she was not affected by the rumour because "[she] know[s] that's not true" Kyra also reports that she "flipped out" when she found out about the rumour and said that she was "pissed off" about it. Jessica too has been a victim of a false rumour.

There are rumours, like, but I don't think any of them are true because. Again this is confusing, my boyfriend's other girlfriend, my boy friend's ex-girlfriend, hates me, but then... (*Because you're dating.*) Because I'm dating him now, and then she's in our class too, and then, some girls started a rumour. She missed school for like three months, and someone said that she was pregnant, and she thought that I started the rumour because I was mad at her. And then, I'm like no I didn't. And it turns out she had, whooping cough I think. And everyone thought I started the rumour and then this girl came forward, she's like, she didn't start the rumour, I did. Jessica didn't start the rumour, I did.

For Kyra and Jessica, false rumours were linked to their sexual experiences and dating relationships and were not within their control. Other girls mentioned rumours as a by-product of a label; with girls being labelled as ‘sluts’ often being subjects of rumours, which perpetuated the label. As demonstrated through Kyra’s and Jessica’s experiences, the girls’ stories revealed that rumours were often used to cause harm and to the subject of a rumour either by disclosing personal information about the person or by spreading false information, both affecting the social relationships of the person and usually the way they feel.

3.1.1.3 - Pressure for sexual experiences

Many girls described feeling and observing pressure from their peer groups to engage in sexual behaviours. Some girls talked about their own experiences in light of the pressures while others described the pressures they observed. Also, while some girls discussed general pressure in and from their peer group, others differentiated between pressures from girls to boys and from boys to girls. Lauren talks about the pressure to do the same things others are doing in order to not be left out.

(And is that okay or do you guys get messages that you shouldn’t or so you get pressured that you should have more sexual feelings than you do have, tell me about – your thought on that?) Umm, I mean we all do and it’s fine, I guess to have them, that’s what everyone says umm sometimes there are pressures to have more depending on what other people like – everyone’s different but some people if your friends are all doing it like you should you know that kind of thing, like

peer pressure but not in the sense that they're trying to pressure you it just you feel pressured because of what they're doing and you kind of wanna be the same – you don't wanna be left behind and stuff so there is that.

Interestingly, Lauren equates sexual feelings with sexual behaviour, not recognizing that one can have feelings and choose not to act on them. More importantly, Lauren points out that sexually experienced peers put pressure on others to engage in more sexual behaviours. Although Lauren acknowledges that sexual feelings are important for sexual experiences she also conveys that one can control their feelings and 'have more' feelings in order to engage in more sexual behaviours. Lauren describes the experiences girls she knows who became sexually active and acknowledges that peer pressure affects girls' decisions.

(And do you think, I mean if you know this, do you think that girls that have umm wanted to or was it something they felt pressured to or have regretted?) Regretted it. One girl regretted it a lot. Well a couple of girls that have like regretted doing it with like – not doing it period but with the person that they did it with like, pregnancies and stuff, but that's not good, but then umm some girls you know they were ready and they are happy that they did it and that's fine. Again, whatever floats your boat.

Lauren reports that most of the girls who gave in to peer-pressure and had sex regretted doing so, either because they were subsequently mistreated by their partners or

due to pregnancies. Experiencing pressure to have “more sexual feelings” and hearing stories about regret can be threatening to girls’ experiences with their own sexual feelings, making sexual feelings appear threatening, as they can lead to pregnancy and mistreatment. Kyra highlights this when she comments on how girls are negotiating pressure.

(How do you think people know when they are ready? Like you think it’s more like a) They don’t (Do you think, right?) They just want to do it. (Right. O.K. So you think it is more of a peer pressure thing, or I should be doing this, or I should try this or) I think they just want to try it.

Kyra’s comment reflects that girls’ decision to “try” things is unrelated to their sexual desire. She perceives sexually active girls as disconnected, not knowing whether they are ready, but wanting to try, possibly due to the pressure they are experiencing from their peers. Kyra also tells a story that exemplifies one way in which peer-pressure can occur and in which she herself puts pressure on a boy, her ex-boyfriend, to have sex with another girl.

... But anyway she is like, he is like yeah, I’m really going to do that (have sex). And I’m like “you don’t have the balls to do that” Cause when we were going out he wouldn’t touch me at all. (O.K.) I’m like “you don’t have the balls to do that”. He is like “yeah I do” I’m like “no you don’t” and he is just sitting there bragging about it. (Right.) And then I asked all the other guys like “would you do it now”?

I'm like you are too young you won't do it. Like you are too young, and he said no I'm not, I'm like Yeah, yeah. And he is like no I'm not, "Like yeah you are".

In the story, Kyra is daring the boy to have sex in front of other people in the school. The boy's sexual experiences, thus, become public knowledge and if he wants to keep his word, he must have sex regardless of his own wants or those of his female partner. Kyra's story also portrays a chain of pressures; Kyra and her peers pressure the boy and the boy pressures the girl, indicating that peer-pressure dynamics are complex and that boys may also be victims of peer pressure.

Although some girls, like Lauren and Kyra, talked about general peer-pressure, in the stories of many girls, pressure from boys to girls was salient. Kyra notes that she has been noticing that boys were starting to put more pressure on girls to engage in sexual behaviours. Brady too acknowledges pressure from boys.

(Ok. I mean you mentioned earlier that guys think about it at your age. So tell me about that.) Yeah, like guys, they always want to, they'll come up to us and just be like, do you want to flash me, do you want to give me head and things like that. And then the girls just like walk away and give them like dirty (... *And what do you think the guy's hoping, do you think they're actually hoping to get that or are they just trying to get a reaction out of people?*) Well some guys I think actually hope to get it. And some guys actually do get it. Like some of my friends did that. And I just like left them just I, just gross. They're 14 and they're

doing stuff like that. (*Yeah. How did they feel afterwards?*) Well, they felt kind of bad because something they did wrecked their friendship.

Like Kyra, Brady describes overt pressure to engage in sexual behaviours with boys. The message in Brady's story is that boys are entitled for sexual feelings and pleasures and that it is acceptable for boys to pressure girls into sexual behaviours regardless of girls' feelings. Brady also notes the consequences of giving in to pressure, stating that it affects girls' friendships. Brady also discusses the implication of girls' giving in to pressure on their future sexual relationships and behaviours.

(*Ok, so I was asking if it makes it easier or harder to go out with guys once you have a label on you and you were saying it's harder.*) Yeap. Because then they constantly ask you to like, do things, stuff like, give them head and all that and then you got to like say "no" and stuff, and they keep on nagging until you actually do it.

Brady's comment highlights that some girls engage in sexual behaviours not out of their own desire but in response to persistent pressure. It also echoes previous discussion on labels – once a girl gives in to pressure she is expected to continue engaging in the behaviour and experiences continuous pressure from boys, and it thus becomes harder to say 'no' to boys' initiation. Interestingly, Brady does not think girls have sexual feelings at her age.

(And how about girls. Are girls interested sexually, are they having sexual feelings yet or) Nope.

Therefore, the message Brady is receiving from her peers is that girls' sexual feelings are not important. It is acceptable for boys to have sexual feelings and for girls to engage in sexual behaviours that are pleasing for boys without having feelings of desire.

Jenna, who reports having no dating or sexual relationships in her peer group, is also aware of pressure dynamics between boys and girls, thinking that boys would be more likely to want more sexual activities and more likely to pressure girls into them.

Girls are exposed to a variety of pressures to engage in sexual behaviours, ranging from general peer pressure to overt statements, with girls' own feelings playing a limited role, if any. When labels and pressure operate together in girls' peer contexts in the ways outlined by girls in the previous few sections, it is not surprising that few girls acknowledge sexual desire at all as it could be yet another source of confusion and danger.

3.1.1.4 - Pressure for long-term dating relationships

3.1.1.4.1 - Dating relationship as the only safe place for sexual experiences

Some girls related that a dating relationship is the only socially acceptable and safe way for a girl to experiment with her sexuality; girls who engage in sexual activities or become sexually active within a dating relationship are free from derogatory labelling. When Kyra is asked about the range of sexual things girls and boys do at her age she replies:

Well if you were actually believe the talk, then there is there is some...But most of us don't go out with anybody. So nothing happens.

Although the question does not directly query about sexual exploration outside a dating relationship, Kyra's response implies that all sexual experiences occur between boys and girls who go out, that is, who are engaged in a monogamous relationship. Jessica implies that having a crush on a boy means that a girl is interested in a dating relationship, implying that it is within such relationship can a girl engage in behaviours such as holding hands and kissing.

(Okay. So what do you think, so what does having a crush mean? What does that, what does the body say when you have a crush?) You just get really nervous and you want to go out with him, but nobody ever really does anything when you go out except dance with the dances and maybe kiss him, maybe.

Jessica's response indicates that a girl cannot respond to her feelings without having a relationship that involves a commitment. Similarly, for Jenna, the existence of a "crush", romantic feelings towards a boy, necessitate the interest in a dating relationship.

(Ok. So what would you call it if a girl is interested in a guy? What do you guys call that? What kind of language do you use?) I don't know we just call that usually a relationship. Like wanting a relationship or stuff like that.

Lauren articulates the difference in terms of social consequences between a girl that is in a dating relationship and a girl that is not. When asked about what kinds of behaviours result in sexual labelling of boys and girls Lauren says,

Well, someone who like you know – it depends, it they do it with that one girl and then they are like very – like we did it cause they’ve been going out for a long time and they loved the person or whatever, then it’s fine.

Lauren clearly articulates that the social message for girls is that sexuality is only acceptable within a long-term dating relationship. Sexuality outside of such relationship is socially frowned upon, often resulting in derogatory labelling, such as ‘whore’ or ‘slut’. Kyra further articulates that it is not the mere existence of the relationship that allows for sexual exploration; it is the duration of the relationship and the level of closeness that dictate the sexual experience.

(O.K. So your friends you think, how far do most of your friends are comfortable going?) Are comfortable going? *(Yeah)* How long they have been dating the person. *(Mmm O.K. So what the, like what do you think what’s the range?)* And you have to actually know them, really well...

3.1.1.4.2 - *Social enforcement of dating relationships*

Many girls also talked about processes by which peers were policing dating relationships once a boy and a girl started dating and discouraging the dissolution of such relationships. Kyra experienced such pressure from her friends when she continued to interact with her male-friends while dating a boy.

(Oh O.K. so is it hard to talk to guys when you have a boyfriend, like do guys get jealous or something? Or what, what happens there?) They would be like “Oh you are cheating” I’m like “No I’m not, you are an idiot” *(Right, really, so once you have like a boyfriend, or known to have a boyfriend like it just makes it a lot harder to like have male friends or just talk to people without it being a big deal?)* Or even like joke around with people because they are like “Oh you are flirting” and I’m like “You are an idiot”.

Kyra reposts that her friends were guarding her behaviour and dictating her that it is not appropriate to interact with other boys when one has a boyfriend. The social message of her friend’s comment is that one’s friendships are impacted by one’s dating status; a dating relationship necessitates a girl to alter her behaviour in a peer group once she is dating. Kelly experienced discouraging messages from her friends when she chose to end a dating relationship with a boy, a message that says that she should have not broken off the relationship.

(What kinds of things would they judge you about?) Well, when I broke with my first boyfriend, everybody started seeing me as different and stuff, so they started like saying I act totally different and stuff when I acted the same as I did, well at least I thought I did, I didn't think I changed. But everybody was saying I act differently, I totally changed, I'm not the same person when I really was. Like some people would say I was totally different and others would say, I'm the same I haven't changed at all. It was really confusing. Like I didn't know what to think any more.

Although Kelly perceived that she was the same person in and outside of a dating relationship, her peers perceived her differently, confusing her about who she was and about how she out to behave in order to accepted for who she was. Similarly to Kyra's experience, Kelly's dating status affected her relationships with her friends. Overall, girls' comments suggest that girls are subjected to two pressures about dating relationships, one internal and one external. Girls perceive that a dating relationship is the only place where they can safely act on their sexual feelings and crushes, which represents an internal pressure to engage in monogamous relationships. Girl also experience messages from their peers that encourage them to remain in dating relationships, which is an external pressure.

3.1.1.5 - Publicly talking about sexuality

Although rumours are also a way through which peers talk about sexuality and their sexual experiences, they are fundamentally different from the publicly open

conversations peers hold about sexuality; while rumours are often secretive and false, public discussions are open for other peers to listen and usually involve actual experiences and thoughts peers have. Many girls mentioned what is often said in their peer groups and class rooms and discussed how their peers talk about the subject. Some of the girls also related to the effects of such conversations on their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Some girls talked about the fact that one's sexual experiences were in the public domain and that everyone knew about what their peers were or were not doing with their partner(s). Lauren described information sharing processes in her grade.

(And how did you know that was happening like did you girls talk about it or?) It goes around the school, everyone hears about what people are doing and does and yeah they all talk about it and they are proud of it. It's like okay. (*So girls would talk about it with other girls or would guys talk about with others?*) Girls would talk about it with other girls. Guys would talk about it with other guys and then it would get around and everyone would know.

This description was echoed by many girls; one's crushes, feelings, and experiences were often known to others and were frequently discussed by peers. Jessica too notes often hearing peers talk about sexuality-related topics and observe that girls and boys talk differently about the subject.

(Do you think that girls your age have sexual feelings?) They have lots of crushes and stuff and some girls will be like oh he's so hot I want to get him in bed, but they're joking and stuff. And like they make fun of it and stuff but nobody would ever do it.

Jessica describes that girls openly disclose and joke about their sexual feelings for boys. For girls, having sexual feelings is related to the wish to engage in sexual intercourse (“get him in bed”). When asked about whether boys have sexual feelings and about the way boys talk about them Jessica comments,

(What do you think?) Probably. Yeah. They probably have crushes and stuff. But they're not as straightforward with crushes with friends. They'll be like oh she's cute, but not like I really have a crush on her.

According to Jessica, boys are not as overt about their feelings as are girls. Sarah too states that girls are more open about sexuality than are girls.

See we are just open. If you are really in the mood you just yell it out. Like “Yea, really horny!”. [Laughter] ... That's honestly how we did it.

Sarah gives another example:

Because like, like it's kinda funny but in science class we are like "Oh God this movie is really turning me on like".

Sarah goes on to state that boys are not as open and are often surprised by girls' comments. Brady too states that boys are not comfortable with girls' openness while being perfectly accepting of that of boys'.

(And is that OK for girls to be horny?) Yeah.... guys like laugh when girl say like talk stuff like that *(Really?)* Yeah. *(What do you think they find funny?)* They think it's like weird. ... Why would girls be saying that and like, the guys say it all the time....But hearing it from a girl is weird. *(So hearing, what would be examples that a guy would laugh at?)* Like if a girl were to tell him another girl that she's horny and then that girl going like, saying it to like a guy or like say in front of a guy, and the guy would start laughing because he'll think it's like weird. *(Weird that a girl...)* Because you mostly hear it from guy saying oh yeah, I'm horny and stuff like that, and not from a girl...

The feedback from boys in Sarah's and Brady's peer groups is quite invalidating of girls' sexual experiences and feelings. Thus, open communication among peers about girls' and boys' sexuality may emit various messages; sharing and openness are acceptable, one's experiences are in the public domain, and it is not as acceptable for girls to have sexual feelings and experiences, or at least to talk about them.

Such open communication about sexual feelings along with the confusing and even contradictory messages about what is and what is not acceptable may make some girls uncomfortable when they overhear such conversations. Kelly speaks to such feelings of discomfort. She echoes other girls when describing how peers talk about sexuality. Unlike Jessica, however, Kelly notes that girls are more secretive about the topic than boys.

(What's the difference about how girls talk sex and how boys talk about sex?) I don't think it's that bad when girls talk about it. When guys talk about it, it's gross. They think about it too much. Way too much. *(Right. Whereas girls are more secretive about it or are they more)* I think they're more quiet about it, but I've heard girls talk about it too, but not as much, not half as much as guys do.

Kelly indicates that overhearing conversations about sexual feelings and experiences is uncomfortable for her and believes that girls and boys talk too much and too openly about the subject.

(Girls and boys?) Yeah, everybody. Sometimes it's funny, like as a joke, but other times it's just like, okay, it's kinda gross, why are you telling this, we don't need to know this. I have this girl in my class and she's really funny, she's the class clown. And she's always making jokes about something. And if you say something she can turn anything into something dirty. And it's really funny, but sometimes it's like, oh god, okay and your cheeks go bright red and everything

and you don't have anything to do with it, oh wow. Weird that's different. (*So is that embarrassing when it happens to you and you're the one*) Yeah, it's embarrassing.

Kelly, who thinks sexuality can be “dirty” is embarrassed to listen to sexual jokes and stories. Public space where information about other’s sexual experiences is shared is thus an uncomfortable place for her.

Two of the girls in the study, Shannon and Jenna, said that their immediate peer groups do not talk about sexuality and that they occasionally overhear sexuality-related conversations held by boys, never by girls. Shannon also said that she “never really [hears] that because guys kinda go by themselves”.

Except for Shannon and Jenna, most of the girls discussed how sexuality is talked about among peers in similar ways; what varied was their levels of participation in such conversations, from active initiators who enjoy the openness to passive listeners who are made feel uncomfortable. A number of things are important to note here. While having such open communication about sexuality might provide a safe space for discussing one’s feelings and experiences, its existence can also put pressure on certain individuals to disclose more information than they are comfortable to disclose. Further, such openness may cause individuals to feel uncomfortable. Also, in light of the continuous danger of sexual labelling, open communication and sharing of information about each other’s experiences may be a catalyst for labelling, which, as discussed, has greater impact on girls.

3.1.1.6 - Source of information

Some girls indicated that their peers were the source of sexuality-related information, and that they usually would go to their peers for advice. Jessica explains that one of the friends in her group is knowledgeable about sexuality and would be Jessica's address for information.

(If you had any questions about sex, or sexual feelings, do you know who you would talk to?) A: I wouldn't talk to anyone. I wouldn't ask. If I had to ask anyone, I think my friend has an auntie named A. And A's in our group but she knows everything so everyone would be like Auntie A what's, so everyone calls her Auntie A because, but she's actually K(girl's name)'s aunt and she's only a couple months older. She knows everything so if I wanted to know at least something, I'd ask her.

Jessica does not indicate that sexuality is the centre of her friends' conversations but indicates that she would ask them for information if she needed. Sarah described having a more open communication about sexuality with her friends and reported that friends are the main source of information in her peer group. Sarah's own experience and knowledge along with her openness to the subject secure her a special position within her immediate and more distant group of friends.

But I know that lots of my friends who aren't experienced ask me like absolutely everything. They are like "I don't really want to ask you..." I'm just like I'm so open, I'm more open than anyone I think you know. "Just ask me anything"

Sarah's also promotes her status as a resourceful friend by actively sharing knowledge and experiences in order to educate her friends. When talking about the importance of condom use Sarah said:

(And what about things like STDs or safe sex or pregnancy like how much do you think people in your grade know and how ?) Well I have been informing my whole gym class, I'm like every single one of you. Like I was just like [Laughter]

Having an open communication with her friends was not only helpful for Sarah in her own experiences but also ensued in her ability to establish status in her social group. For girls whose friends have older siblings, information is sometimes transmitted from the older sibling to the younger one and to their group of friends. Kyra describes how her friends have come to be knowledgeable about sexuality.

(What do you think, like I mean I know like it just happens sometimes like you will have something really distinct about a given year or whatever it is, do you have any idea what's behind that with your class?) Well Paige has a brother that's older, two brothers that's older, and a sister so she knows like her and her sister

are so tight so she tell me everything. (*Ahhh, yeah*) And then J(girls name), so she is like, she taught us everything and then the guys just well they are bastards.

Kyra describes a process similar to that of Sarah, whereby a more knowledgeable and/or experienced friend assumes a “teaching” role and actively transmits information. Some girls’ stories alluded to the fact that sharing of information contributed to the creation of closely knit groups of friends who are more open about sexuality and where information is readily accessible. The openness and tightness of Sarah’s group often result in group cohesiveness. For instance, Sarah reports that all her friends have relationship with older boys.

Yeah but lots of the girls in my grade, ahhm like all of my friends. So like basically my gym class they, they are not really big into the guys in our grade they are kinda like me and went to like experienced guys.

Sarah also reports that her group watches similar TV shows, which too are related to sexuality.

Well I happen to find out that all my friends on a Friday night happen to turn on the TV at 11:0’ clock. [Laughter] (*O.K. And what’s going on at 11:0’clock?*)

Porn

Thus, for Sarah and her friends, sexuality-related information plays more central role in her friendships than for some of the other girls. While most girls indicated that their friends are their primary source of information, information sharing processes vary.

3.1.1.7 - Summary of sexuality in the context of peers and friends

A number of themes emerged from the way girls discussed their experiences with sexuality in the context of their relationships with their peer groups. Girls talked about peers as a source of multiple pressures and of various and often contradictory messages they receive from them. Peers were often a source of pressure to engage in sexual behaviours and to talk about sexuality while often labelling girls who were “too sexually active”, dressed “too revealing”, or talked “too much” about their sexual experiences. Peers were also a source of pressure to engage in long-term dating relationships, which become a safe place for girls to experiment with sexual feelings and behaviours, with little risk for sexual labelling. Peers and friends also emerged as the main source of information about sexuality for most girls, which may be a by-product of the overall open communication about sexuality among peers, as was described by most girls.

3.1.2 - Family

Girls talked about their families as having various impacts on their sexual experiences and dating relationships. Families were a source of pressure to engage in various activities, barriers to certain behaviours, and source of support and guidance in sexuality and relationships.

3.1.2.1 - Source of pressure

Some girls described receiving pressuring messages from their parents and siblings with regards to dating relationships and sexuality. For Kelly, her twin sister was a source of pressure to engage in a dating relationship she did not want. Although Kelly discussed this experience in her first interview, she revisited the experience in her second interview.

(Okay. So the next part is on dating. Kelly says she remembers to start liking boys in Grade 3. She recounts Grade 4 as when she had her first boyfriend. She said he would always ask her to dance with him and she kept saying no. Her sister convinced her she should go out with him that he was very upset that she kept saying no. She agreed to go out with him and they dated for nine months. So what changed your mind when, because you kept saying no you didn't want to go out with him but your sister convinced you) Well, I sort of felt bad so I thought I would, but then I ended up liking him. So we dated for a while. It wasn't really dating though it was more like just good friends.

By giving in to her sister's pressure to date a boy Kelly did not like, Kelly learned that it is acceptable to override her own feelings in order to please others. As Lauren was growing up, she was exposed to a rather different pressuring message.

(What are the messages about sex that you get from parents?) Don't do it, abstinence is the answer.

Lauren further described feeling the pressure to listen to her mother's lectures on sexuality.

(And do you talk openly with your parents about sex or is it kind of off limits for you?) I don't really want to. My mom will sometimes try and bring it up, not that I'd want to.

Although the content of the message Lauren received was somewhat opposite to that experienced by Kelly, that is, avoid sexuality, the two are similar in that both signal girls that it is acceptable to ignore their own feelings. Lauren also described receiving conservative messages from her parents about her appearance.

(And this sort of a message you remember getting growing up like, how do you know to act more conservative in front of your parents?) Well your parents expect you to be more responsible and you know, I'm a good kid, I don't like boys.

The message Lauren grew up hearing from her parents is thus one that says that sexuality is not something good girls are interested in; good girls do not like boys and are abstinent from sexual behaviours.

3.1.2.2 - Barrier to/in relationship and sexuality

Some of the girls mentioned different ways in which they felt that their families impeded on their dating relationships and sexual experiences. For Lauren, dating a boy from her brother's grade was a problem.

(Okay, umm and then your third boyfriend.) Third one, he was probably more scared than I was [Laughter] scared of my brother. So he was more like ah two feet away, that kind of thing.

Her boyfriend was uncomfortable engaging in sexual activities with Lauren because he was afraid of her brother. Having a sibling who is unsupportive of a relationship can thus be a barrier. Lauren further elaborates about this relationship:

I don't know I think that mostly ended because of the difference of grades like there were a lot of people who were like he's in my brother's grade and my brother was one of the people saying you know he's in my grade uh so apparently it's sort of because of just people like yeah so that's kind of a difference ...

Jessica had to negotiate her desire for a dating relationship with her parents' prohibition for her to date. The result of her parents' attitude to dating was Jessica's tamed agency in initiating relationships. Although she approved of girls asking boys out, she did not do so out of respect for her parents'.

Oh yeah. Girls at my school they usually don't ask guys out, but I don't see why not. I would have. But like I don't, I wasn't like allowed to have a boyfriend and then, so then when I came home, I'm going like, mom I have a boyfriend, there's nothing you can do about it. So I had to wait for him to ask me out. (*So you kind of thought your mom would be more ok with it if he asked you out?*) No, but I mean there's nothing you're going to do about it, it'd be like, you have to break up with my daughter right now. I think my step dad took it worse than my mom did. She's like, oh really? And then my step dad's like...and he's just like giving me the stone face.

Sarah talked about her mother as a barrier to practicing safe sex.

Well O.K. I did happen to have sex not that long ago and I remember me mom saying like the last time we talked about this was like a while ago me and her. She said that, no, she wouldn't put me on the pill because I'm too young. (*Like . . . would you rather be on the pill?*) Oh yes.

Sarah goes on to tell that when she had sex for the first and only time the condom broke and she had to go to the hospital to get the morning after pill, an experience she found very scary. Her mother's disapproval of the birth control pill directly affected Sarah's sexual experience. Although Sarah did practice safe sex by using a condom, she would be more protected if her mother was more receptive to Sarah's needs.

Sarah also describes feeling that she does not have the ability to make decisions about her choice of birth control as well as about her sexual health.

(So at your age how much power do you feel that you have to make decisions about what kind of birth control you want to be using or like visiting your doctor on your own or something like that?) I can't even visit my doctor because I don't trust her one bit. I just don't like her so therefore I'm not telling her anything. Like I told my mom I'm like I don't like her and that's that. And my mom said "Well too bad there is not there is no Family Doctors around here." "I'm like I'm not comfortable with her I don't like her".

Sarah goes on to tell that she plans to visit a free birth control clinic in the town near by when she can arrange a ride and to go on the birth control pill without her mother's knowledge or help. For Sarah, a decision to become sexually active and to practice sex in a safe and protected manner is hindered by a lack of support and limited communication with her mother.

3.1.2.3 - Source of strength and guidance

Some girls described their families as a source of support in the course of their experiences with dating and as a learning opportunity about dating and sexual relationships. Jenna, who has three older siblings, talked about being exposed to the dating relationships of her siblings and said she was used to seeing her siblings' partners

at her home. She then stated that she looks forward to having similar dating relationships. From these vicarious experiences Jenna learned that it is safe and acceptable to bring partners home and to introduce them to her family.

Kyra referred to her family as a being a source of information about sexuality. When discussing what sex feels like for girls and women Kyra reported that she discussed sex with her father's girlfriend who told her that "when you are younger, girls don't feel anything from it". Kyra felt comfortable to bring stories she was exposed to into her family and to openly discuss them.

Melissa too acknowledges that she learned much of what she knows about sex and sexuality from her mother. Moreover, her mother is a source of information to Melissa's friends.

Well, like, ever since, she talked about it all the time we were growing up. She was just kind of I guess because she's a nurse or something. I don't know. (*So she was a bit more open than maybe other mothers*) Yeah. Like she'd drive my friends to Ringette and then she'd start talking to my friends about it. I was like oh my God. (*And what would your friends say when they...*) Well, one friend, she always be like, oh yeah, your mom's so cool. I always talk to her about stuff like. She's like I don't even talk to my own mom about that and I talk to your mom.

For Melissa, her parents and grandparents are also a source of strength in cases where she doesn't fully trust her internal compass. When discussing how Melissa knows not to give in to social pressures to have sex she said:

Well I don't know. I just, I'm not gonna do anything I don't want to do and I just think about like, my parents and what they'd think if they ever found out I did something like that. And my grandparents or, and then I think like how I'd feel, so, like I would feel so bad and like I couldn't, I'd feel so guilty and everything. I couldn't do something like that.

Although Melissa knows which sexual experiences she is ready for and which she is not, she finds it hard to base her decision solemnly on what she feels in light of the strong peer pressure to engage in sexual activities. She uses her family as a source of reassurance for her decisions in conjunction to her own feelings to remain true to what she wants. It is possible that having an open relationship with her mother and being well informed about various aspects of sexuality allows her to capitalize on her family as a way to stay tuned to her own feelings.

3.1.2.4 - Summary of sexuality in the context of family

When girls discussed the role their families played in their sexual experiences and dating relationships girls alluded to their families as having three different impacts on their experiences. Some girls discussed their families to be a source of pressure, for instance, by encouraging them to date boys against their will or pressure to abstain from sexual activities. Some girls discussed their families as being barriers to their dating relationships and sexual experiences, for instance, by forbidding the use of the birth-

control pill. Yet for other girls, their families were a source of strength and guidance, providing them with information about sexuality and dating relationships.

3.1.3 - Partner

Not all the girls in the study had sexual experiences with partners during this wave of interviews. Although most of the participants were engaged in a dating relationship or had a play-friend before and/or during the interviews, their sexual experiences were limited and their comments about their experiences were brief.

When talking about their various sexual experiences and the role of sexual desire in their relationships girls often talked about initiation of dating relationships, sexual pressures, and the role sexual feelings played in their various experiences.

3.1.3.1 - Initiating relationships

Some of the girls who were in or previously had dating relationships talked about how their dating relationships started with the majority of them stating that the boy initiated the relationship by asking the girl out. Lauren and Jessica described two relationships with a different start. Lauren related that all her dating relationships originated from mutual actions of her partner and her own.

(In both of those relationships, who was the pursuer or the one who said let's go out, or do you wanna go out with me or how was that?) The first one was kind of like a mutual thing. The second one was more; I don't know it was again another mutual thing like oh who do you like? You. Who do you like? You. Okay.

Lauren describes not only mutual initiation of relationship but also an open communication about one's feelings towards the other person, which lead to her dating relationships. Jessica talked about initiating some of the relationships herself and acting on crushes she had for boys.

(So what is it, so you guys, did you guys start dating after a school dance or how was that?) After a school dance, after the first school dance I had a crush on him but both his best friends had crushes on me and I think that he had a crush on me too, but I didn't want to dance with him. So then I asked both of his friends if they wanted to dance because, like I didn't want to hurt their feelings. And they were both too shy, so then I asked him and he was like shaking his head yes, and then later, he asked me out and I said yes.

Similarly to some of the other girls, Jessica states that she enjoys asking boys on dances.

(So you, you went and asked the boys to dance at the dance? And what was that like for you? Had you done that before?) Yeah, I've done it before because like I don't think guys should do all the asking and it's fun, like whether he says yes or no because, like, if he says no you just think about it once and then you're like, okay I'll go find someone else to go dance with and it's just like, not worth having a crush on that person any more if they don't like you, so it's just really fun to ask people to dance. And you feel stupid after they say no but then you find someone else who's better and nicer or something.

It is interesting to note that a crush, for Jessica, is something over which she has control; she would choose not to have a crush on a boy who refuses to dance with her. While other girls talked about asking boys to dances and initiating dating relationships, only Jessica related her agency to her feelings for the boys.

3.1.3.2 - Negotiating pressure for sexual experiences

A few of the girls talked about feeling pressure from their boyfriends and partners to engage in certain sexual activities. Lauren acknowledges feeling pressure from her previous boyfriends. Although she makes a distinction between not wanting to do something and wanting to but being nervous about doing something she states that she gave in to pressure even when she was not ready.

(And how was it like for you in terms of the relationship that you were in, how did you –) Yeah, yeah, the first time I was like the whole French kissing thing I'm like thing umm, no. But then eventually you give in but [Laughter] for a little while but then. I guess it's more like pressure like I just don't want to like I'm against it or whatever cause then I wouldn't have given in, its just you're kind of nervous and you're scared or something of what might happen and stuff. (Okay, so those are two pretty important distinctions that you just made like in being nervous about doing something verses not wanting to, yeah.) If I didn't wanna do it then I didn't but if there's times when you're just like I don't want to cause I'm nervous and then you end up giving in eventually.

In her attempt to negotiate the pressure and the nervousness, it is not clear what role her sexual desire plays in the experience. For Lauren, she continued to kiss with her partners because she got used to the idea and not in response to sexual interest or feeling. Although Lauren acknowledges that she wanted to kiss but was nervous, her agency and desire are missing in the experience. Lauren further elaborates,

And you just start being more comfortable with the idea of it; just think about it and then you can talk to friends about it and then *it just happens*. (*I mean you say the giving in; do you see that as sort of bad?*) It's not – I don't think it's a bad thing but you just get used to it and then you just sort of do, it happens.

In her negotiation of pressure, Lauren's desire is not a motivator of her action; kissing "just happens".

Some of the girls described relationships where pressure was absent and indicate that absence of pressure is crucial for the success of the relationship. Kyra talks about the importance of being ready for certain experiences before engaging in them.

(*What do you think allows you to do that?*) Just, I don't know. Like trusting yourself and trusting that your boyfriend will actually listen to you. (*Yeah, for sure*) Cause if he pressure you then they are gone.

Kyra alludes to the fact that it is common for boys to pressure girls to engage in sexual behaviours within relationships. For her, it is important that the relationships she has are safe and that she is not pressured to do things she is not ready for.

Some girls report feeling no pressure from their partners. Sarah reports her partner to be very supportive and understanding and does not report feeling pressured to engage in sexual activities. She said, “If I said no he would be one of the people that would understand completely”. She also explains why she chose to engage in sexual experiences specifically with this particular partner.

...because R(boy’s name) is like out of all the guys I know, like, he is the only one that I’m actually comfortable with you know so that made it so much easier you know.

Many girls acknowledge that pressure for sexual experiences from partners is common. Girls’ experiences with pressure and their negotiation of sexual experiences within pressure are different, from acknowledging the giving-in process to developing a zero-tolerance attitude towards it.

3.1.3.3 - Desiring but waiting: Negotiating agency and desire

Though some girls acknowledged being ready for and wanting to have a certain sexual experience, they did not engage in sexual behaviours because they waited for their partners to initiate the activity. Kyra was ready to kiss her partner but did not acknowledge the option of kissing him herself.

(O.K. Now you said that when you were dating your ex you guys went together for like three months and he wouldn't touch you. Like did you feel like do you think you were more ready to do something than he was?) (Nods yes) (Yah? O.K. So I mean that's one of the questions we have is it O.K. for girls to have desire? Like is it O.K. for girls to want to do sexual stuff or is that looked down upon?)
But it wasn't even anything, like he wouldn't kiss me.

Kyra indicates that she was ready to kiss her partner, which indicates that she was connected with her sexual desire. However, acting on her feelings was not perceived as an option. Lauren became frustrated when a boy she dated refused to touch her.

(And did you ever, during any of your relationships, I shouldn't just assume that it's the guy that wanted to do stuff, but was there ever a time when you wanted to do something, more than you had before or?) Sometimes I got mad when I was dating the guy that was my brother's age who as – I'd be like why are you so scared of women [Laughter] come on guy I'd be like just you know but you know I wouldn't I'd never made him so something he didn't want to. I'd just maybe sometimes but he was being stupid.

Lauren is trying to negotiate between her desire to engage in sexual activities and her fear of pressuring her partner. Jessica too is trying to negotiate her desire and her

partner's passivity. Jessica is aware of how she wants the kiss to happen and is taking the actions to make things happen the way she wants it.

Well I haven't kissed him yet. *(No. So is that kind of something you'd like to do or are you still wanting to wait before doing that?)* I want him to make the first move because it'd be like well I made the first step and I told you I like you, so now you have to try and kiss me.

For Jessica, there is a difference between physically initiating a behaviour (attempting to kiss someone) and talking about it. She thus found a way to negotiate her desire with her perception about the boy's role as the initiator.

(So if a girl wanted to kiss a boy, is it okay for her to, like if she was with a boyfriend) If I wanted a boy to kiss me, I really really want to be like, so when you going to kiss me, because I did that one day. I'm like I have a crush on you and then, he's like, oh really. I'm like yeah. And then the next time when are you going ask me out, and then, but I think he liked me before I was saying stuff like that or else I wouldn't be like openly talking about that to him.

Gender roles appear to be another factor affecting girls' behaviour, specifically, girls' expectation for a boy to initiate sexual activity. While girls are connected with their desire and are aware of what they are ready for, they are also limited, to a varying degree, by their perception of boys' and girls' roles in a relationship.

3.1.3.4 - *The body in relationships*

3.1.3.4.1 - *Voices of connection*

Some girls described noticing different sensations in their bodies when they were with a boy they liked or were dating. Jessica reports being connected to her bodily sensations as her relationship with her boyfriend progressed. She reports being “very very very nervous” when she thinks about her first kiss. When her boyfriend and her were flirting and holding hands in a dissection she says, “It was just like, I was really nervous but I couldn't stop laughing. We were like sticking our fingers in the tubes so that they'd meet and stuff.”

Jessica also distinguishes her bodily sensations when she is with her boyfriend from those when she is with her other male friends.

(So would you describe then kind of the feelings that you have when you're with your boyfriend. You know, kind of nervousness and maybe butterflies in your stomach or just giggly.) Yeah. When I'm with him I get really nervous, like I don't know, I have something hanging from my face or something that like but that's like really the only time I'm ever nervous around guys.

Melissa too notes that she feels differently around boys she likes.

(So do you think, so when girls like a guy, how do, like how would you know, if you're comfortable talking, how do you know when you like a guy. What is it that's different about that guy than you are around other guy friends?) Usually

when I like a guy I'm more shy and I'm more careful what I do and say in front of him. Like I can't just be myself. Like I don't want to do something stupid or something.

Melissa describes feeling more self-conscious around boys she likes and indicated that she is aware of her feelings for a boy and the effect of these feelings on her behaviour. Sarah describes being connected to her sexual feelings during sexual experiences with her partner. When discussing her bodily sensations during sexual activities, she is aware of the cues her body is sending her. She acknowledges having times when she is aroused and times when she is not interested in sexual activities.

...But normally like when like we are like making out then you know you kinda you know boost that up a bit you know and so I have never really wanted to say no you know? Basically, not with him anyway you know...

Sarah acknowledges wanting to make out and enjoying it and differentiates her experience with the present partner from past experiences where she wanted to say "no". Sarah also reports knowing when she does not want a particular activity.

(O.K. How does that, how does that feel I guess I'm wondering how that feels in your body? Like if your body could speak to them what would it say?) Oh dam.

[Laughter] (O.K. So it's not like "Oh this is so fun". It's like "Ahh damm"?)

Then again I have only like had sex once on Sunday.

3.1.3.4.2 - Positive feelings about the body within a relationship

Kyra was the only girl to remark the direct effect of being in a dating relationship on her feelings towards her body and herself.

(Yeah. Have there been times in your life where you had been more worried about being perfect; you think that's more important? No? How old were you then? Or is that like this past year or?) Last year, ever since I started going out with C(boy's name), like I felt so much, like I feel so much better....Cause like I could like I'd get home and he would come over and I'd be like. Like I would have all my makeup off and I'd be sitting there in my sweat pants "Hey" like I'd be sitting there and he is like "Hey" shirts a big pant and he would be like he would still sit there and say I was the most beautiful person he has ever seen.

Kyra says that she felt she was accepted and loved by C(boy's name) for who she was and not for what she looked like and that this particularly helped her to feel good about herself and about her body. She observed that after that relationship she reduced the amount of makeup she used to wear and occasionally did not wear make-up at all.

3.1.3.5 - Missing discourse of desire as motivator for:

3.1.3.5.1 - Dating relationships

When talking about their relationships, many of the earlier dating relationships girls had, as well as some of the relationships existent during the interview, appeared to exclude sexual feelings and interests. Motives for such relationships were rather social.

For some girls who had some sexual experience, the voice of sexual desire was also absent. In Lauren's description of a break-up with a grade nine boyfriend Lauren is neutral about the relationship and its end. There is no reference to having liked the boy, or regretting the relationship was over.

(Okay, yeah and did that end like on good terms or you were sad that it ended or?) Umm, I was kind of like; I don't know it was weird. I don't know I wasn't happy it was over but I wasn't upset. I was kind of like oh well, ah I don't care too much [Laughter]. It wasn't that big of a deal.

Lauren's neutral attitude to having a relationship with that particular boy indicates that liking the boy or being attracted to him played a minor role. For Melissa, a dating relationship in grade seven was a source of discomfort rather than source of pleasure.

Well we started going out but it was kinda like we avoided each other. *(Okay. And how long did that last for?)* A: I think I don't know, like a month or so. *(Yeah. Do you remember how it ended?)* Yeah, I just said to him, well we never talk any more and this is kinda silly so. He's like, yeah, let's just be friends.

Melissa described her two other dating relationships in a similar tone. For her, dating relationships originated in a newly developed friendship and in a wish to spend time with the person. However, once labelled as dating relationships, they became a

source of inconvenience and she chose to end them. The motivation behind Melissa's last relationship was also unrelated to her feelings and desires.

Well that was pretty much my last boyfriend. Like I had one for a day, but I didn't want to, like, I didn't want to be his girlfriend or whatever, but like, he asked me and I felt bad about saying no. So just kinda sure, and then I felt real bad and I didn't know what to do and it was kinda stupid. And then, I like avoided him all day and then he's just like, what's really going on. I'm like, let's just be friends please. And he's like, Okay. It was kinda awkward for a while but now it's fine.

3.1.3.5.2 - Sexual experiences

Some girls' stories of their sexual experiences indicated that desire played a very little role in their experiences or was absent altogether. Lauren's description of her experiences with kissing within a two-week long dating relationship exemplifies that the motive for the experience was not sexual. Kissing, for her, is something she got used to, rather than something she wanted and chose to do.

Yeah it was fine, I mean two weeks, man [laughter] it's not long so it wasn't, it didn't happen that much but, it wasn't a big deal the first time and then after it was like uh, it's not so bad and then you just kind of get used to it and then it's okay.

Kelly explains why she thinks it is acceptable to kiss.

(And how did you know that? Did your mother ever tell you or at school did you learn that or) Well I just figured it's okay. Everybody kisses.

Kelly reasoned that it is ok for her to kiss with her boyfriend by relying on external cues on what is acceptable and what is not. She did not mention her internal feeling of desiring the experience, which suggests a disconnection of her feelings. Kelly further indicates that she bases her decisions about sexual activities on external factors.

(Where did you get messages about sex or sexual feelings or what's ok to do right now?) Well, I don't know. Like in Grade 6 I held the guy's hand. Like just one and stuff like, this is ok, it's fine. We're not doing anything bad. And so then, when I met my boyfriend now, we didn't even kiss until like two months after we were dating. Like not two months, but months. And it was fine; it was like we're not doing anything bad. This is fine.

The indicators of what Kelly is ready to do sexually with a partner are external factors, such as peers and length of the dating relationship. Although Sarah indicates being connected with and motivated by her sexual desire on some occasions, she also describes engaging in sexual activities when she does not want to.

“He is just like yeah, I would like to make out and I’m just like “Yeah”. Just go with the flow you know.”

Like if a guy wanted to do something and I didn’t I would just be like actually “what do I have to loose? Whatever”. Type thing... Kind of like but I know it’s pretty bad. (*How does, like in that moment, if you like continue it. How does that feel for you?*) Well if he just keeps going? And you are just like no? (*Yes*) Well technically I don’t say no, I just think no.

Although Sarah reports that she feels comfortable with her partner and can say “no” at any time, she does not do so even when she feels disinterested in a sexual activity. Sarah also denotes planning to engage in sexual behaviours without a desire to do so.

(*So what’s it like for you having sex what do you think it would be like having sex if you were really into it in that moment? but you decided to have sex anyway?*) I would just probably do it, like I don’t know ... But I don’t know I’d probably just do like I don’t know I don’t really give it much thought. If it happens, it happens.

Overall, some of the girls’ stories revealed that they chose to engage in certain activities, such as dating relationships and sexual experiences, for reasons other than their sexual feelings. Girls agreed to date boys as they felt bad for saying “No” and were occasionally made uncomfortable when a newly friendship they developed with a boy

turned into a dating relationship. Girls also reported external factors, such as social norms, as well as pressure to be the motivators of some of their sexual experiences.

3.1.3.6 - Seen that, done that: Choosing to stay single

After being in dating relationships, Kyra and Melissa reported that they decided to stay single and that they do not want boyfriends. Kyra explains why she ended the previous relationship and why she prefers to be single.

(So why did you guys break up?) I just didn't want a Boyfriend. *(O.K.)* I think of him as a chore *(Oh O.K. Oh really?)* Like seriously.

For Kyra, a dating relationship ensued in negative social outcomes, including rumours, lies, and fights, with her sexuality often playing a central role. A relationship is also time-consuming, she noted. Consequently, Kyra decided to stay single. Melissa did not articulate her decision in as much detail but stated a similar decision.

(So this year do you notice more girls going out with people?) Well sometimes. There's like a couple. But I don't know, like it's just some people, it depends on what you want I guess. Like I really don't want a boyfriend, I just don't want one. *(Yeah, exactly.)* I just don't like having a boyfriend, like it's, I don't know.

Both, Kyra and Melissa, arrived at their decision after having had experiences with dating relationships, deciding to resist various social pressures and to follow their own wishes.

3.1.3.7 - Summary of sexuality in the context of relationships with partners

Most of the girls were just beginning to explore dating and sexual relationships at the time of their interviews, which is reflected in the content of their stories. Girls discussed the ways their relationships consummated, with some girls reporting that boys usually ask girls out and some girls reporting mutual initiation processes. Some girls also raised the issue of sexual pressure, discussing how their experience of pressure affected their sexual experiences. A few girls discussed facing a conflict between their perception of gender roles and their sexual feeling. Some girls also observed the effect of their relationships on their feelings in and about their bodies, noting, for instance, feelings of nervousness and the presence of sexual feelings or discussing the inexistence of such feelings. Lastly, based on their experiences, some girls reported that they prefer to be single and not to date boys, and discussed their motives for their decisions.

3.2 - 3rd Wave of Interviews

3.2.1 - Peers

In the third wave of interviews, some of the themes girls mentioned when talking about sexuality in their peer groups were similar to those mentioned in the second wave. Overall, as girls matured from the second wave of interviews, it appears that sexuality played a more important role in girls' social lives. When talking about their peer groups,

girls primarily talked about sexual labelling, girl-fights and rumours, various pressures in girls' social settings, the relationship between sexuality and social power, the stereotypes about girls' sexuality that prevail in girls' social groups, as well as the prevalence of pregnancies and STIs in girls social settings.

3.2.1.1 - Sexual labelling among peers: Are you a Whore/Slut?

The use of sexual labelling was mentioned again in this wave of interviews, being raised again by every single girl.

3.2.1.1.1 - What gets a girl labelled?

Many things a girl might do may lead to the use of sexualized labels against her. Lauren describes the various things a girl may do which could lead to labelling as a 'whore' or a 'slut'.

Sleeping with guys and not being in a relationship with them. Sleeping with many guys whether or not they're in a relationship with them. Um, girls that don't even necessarily, you don't have to sleep with them, there are girls that just date guys, drop them, date guys, drop them, like literally, it's day in, day out change. You don't know what's going on. [Laughs] ...And those girls get labelled.

Lauren also links girls' behaviour to the way a label is used against them, differentiating between being labelled directly to their face or indirectly behind girls' backs.

Then there's other girls that are like, there's one girl that goes to my school who has literally slept with absolutely everything, and she will run down the hall and tell you about it. That is what I would consider more of a slutty girl. And those girls are just dirt or garbage or whatever guys want to call them. Um, and most of the guys I hang around are not really interested in girls like that and they do make jokes about them quite often. And they more get like outright they would call them a slut. Or something like, something like that. It's just common. But then to other girls who are more like you know have had sexual relations, generally it's just that you have sex, a bunch of times with different guys, then they might be called certain names but not usually to their face, it's kind of like a, I don't know, like you, you hear about it if you're close with the guy or something you're like call these girls that. Other girls might be talking about them and calling them that. But not really to their faces if it's... Not super-severe.

Lauren differentiates between different levels of “sluttiness” with girl who have more partners and who openly disclose their relationships being more harshly judged than girls with fewer partners.

Melissa was the only girl to mention the existence of labelling of girls who choose not to engage in many sexual behaviours; she reports that the label ‘tight’ has been used against her by both, boys and girls, in the context of her present relationship with a boy.

(So you comfortable telling me about sex stuff with you guys? Or-) Oh yeah, well I've only kissed him. *(And do you feel like ... like tell me kind of- Um, like do you feel like that's exactly where you want to be or would you...?)* Yeah. I don- ... *(Yeah?)* I don't want to, yeah. People call me tight. [Laughing] *(Really?)* Yeah. Like I don't- I don't know do a lot of that stuff. *(Like other girls call you that or guys?)* Mmmhmm. Guys. *(Really?)* I guess girls do, but not in the same way. Like guys just, like, yeah, she doesn't do a lot of stuff but...

Some girls talked about the way information about girls' sexual experiences gets out to the public, which then leads to labelling. Jenna reports that boys are the ones to disclose.

(What about um, like do people find out at your school like do you know oh so and so had sex or like...) Yeah... *(Who do you think usually tells? Like who?)* The guy. *(The guy? Yeah?)* It's kind of stereotype but yeah [Laughs].

Brady too thinks the boys disclose the information and elaborates on the consequences of disclosure.

(How do people find out that she'd done it?) 'Cause the things you do with the guys, the guys blab..., 'cause they think they're all good and everything 'cause they got that from a girl.... So then that's how the girls get labelled and like

especially like if you get with this guy and he's one of the popular kids then that gets around really fast.

Sarah links sexual labelling to open disclosure of one's sexual experiences. She reports that girls who engage in sexual experiences are not labelled unless they openly talk about their experiences.

Um I find a lot of the people that talk a lot like um will get a not-so-great reputation. (*Okay.*) Like just tell the world everything, you know what I mean? (*Are there certain specific topics?*) Um stuff like what they've done with multiple guys type thing. That will get you like a bad reputation, you know.... That's not something most people really appreciate, I don't think.

Some girls also report that a girl does not necessarily need to do something to get labelled. According to Brady, labels are often based on false rumours that other girls spread around as part of a fight.

(*What kinds of things when girls talk behind each other's back, what kind of stuff is said?*) Hmm, like girls will be like: "Oh, this one's a whore because she did stuff with this guy." Or, like, even if it all be made up to- Like they'll just say "Oh, this girl did this with this guy."... "She did this with this, she's a whore, she's a slut," and all that. (*Yeah and so and yet around sexuality you said a lot of*

times it's made up.) Yeah, a lot of it- a lot of it is just made up just to get back at each other.

Jenna too reports that labelling is often based on assumptions that are being made about girls' behaviour based on whom she is dating or spending time with.

(Um, and how do we find that out? Like is it the boys that tell or is it the girls that tell?) I think it's just a lot of assumptions that are being made.

Lauren relates similarly that labels often result on rumours that are based on people's speculations.

...whatever, it's crazy. Um, I guess it's more what people assume that they do than what they actually do.

Melissa reports that a boy may use a label on a girl out of jealousy, if a girl chooses someone else over the boy.

(And what would be the context that a guy would use i [label]?) Um, I don't know. It's- it's- I think it could be a same reasons like if like maybe a guy is jealous like of another girl or he wishes that he was with that girl but she won't go with him then, "Oh, she's a slut", you know.

Kelly mentions the use of labels by girls as a fun way to greet their friends.

Well, you know, a lot of the other girls will start, like girls are really judgmental. Like they call each other, pardon my language, I'm saying anything rude or... But I hear the words slut, whore, and pardon my language but, bitch all the time. Sorry I am not a swearing person. Like even for fun, they'll just call each other, "Hey whore", or something like that. It's like, what's the point of that? Say, "Hey hon", or "Hey sweetie" or something like that. That's what I say to my friends. I don't call them whores or anything like that.

Some girls also mentioned that the ways girls dress often too leads to girls' labelling, primarily by boys. Brady that labels are often used against girls who wear clothes that reveal their figure.

And like it's more some of the guys calling girls sluts because of the way they dress. (*Really?*) Yeah. So like most of the guys like the way the girls dress just because you can see their figure and ... the way their body looks and everything because a lot now, when guys look into girls, they really don't look into their personality now

According to Brady, while boys enjoy looking at girls' bodies when they wear revealing clothes, they also often label girls for dressing that way. Jenna describes what dress code in her school would result in labelling.

(Um, so what, let's start with the dress one. What would somebody be wearing that somebody might say that person's a slut?) Like tighter clothes or shorter clothes or whatever.

Brady links sexualized labelling of girls based on their clothing to girls' sexual experiences.

(Yeah. And is it if your dress is in a certain way, it's assumed that you do certain things?) Um, people think that sometimes. So they think that if you are so revealing, then you go and you do things with that people and like sexually and everything. When, like really you do not do that but ... *(Right exactly.)* ... they don't know that.

According to Brady, a girl who wears revealing clothes is not only labelled for her appearance, she is also assumed to engage in sexual behaviours with boys, which also leads boys to pressure girls into sexual activities. Thus, sexual experiences and interests are often assumed based on girls' appearance.

Some girls alluded that sexualized labels often result from a combination of factors. Jenna reports that there are often no clear rules to what kind of appearance would result in a label, which she reports to be confusing.

(So then if you're, like where does it um change over? Is it, if your clothes are too tight, or is it if you're too pink, or if you're revealing? Like where does it become slutty?) I guess like a combination of all of those together. *(Yeah. Is that hard to figure out?)* Yeah I guess [Laughing]

Jessica too reports that there are no clear-cut rules and notes that a combination of a girls' dress and her sexual behaviours contribute to the label.

(So what is it that makes somebody a whore or a slut? Like what would be the...)

Well, I don't know sleeping around and stuff. But I'm, I'm not going to say, like if you look at the girls who kinda dress like, like low cut shirts and... really tight jeans and stuff and they're flirting with all the guys, I'm not going to be like 'you're a whore'. But, you just kinda get that vibe from them.

Although Jessica herself does not use labels as freely, she reports that a combination of dress and behaviour contribute together to a girl's labelling. Kyra reports being personally labelled by other girls in her school and speculates that a number of things contributed to labelling.

(Cause you've been in a relationship for a long time. Like you guys have been together for nine months. So what are they basing the label on? Like what gets, what gets you that label? Like is it just having sex with all, is it rumours about

having lots of partners or like what? Or is it just a power thing?) Everything.

Like all those.

A label is then a form of judgement of girls' sexual behaviours, social preferences, and dress. However, it can also be used against girls by falsely claiming that they engaged in certain behaviours and then labelling them, leaving girls little control over whether they are being labelled or not. Further, it can also be used by girls against girls in causal conversations (e.g., greeting friends) which may further perpetuate the labels.

3.2.1.1.2 - Irreversibility of labels: They are here to stay

A number of girls talked about the fact that labels were hard if not impossible to get rid of. If one was labelled, they remained labelled. Jenna says that a label is permanent.

(Um, what happens if a girl gets that label on her? Is it easy to change or?) No, I don't think so. *(Like, it stays with you?)* Yeah.

Lauren also stated that labels were hard to change, elaborating that they become informative for others.

(Like, can, can you come back from being labeled a slut? Like is it once you have that label it's like pretty hard to shake?) I don't think so. Yeah, I think it's pretty, I

don't think you can, unless you moved and no one. 'cause once somebody knows about it, like they, it doesn't leave their mind. When they think of you that's what they think of. Like I mean that's how a lot of people know other people. Who is this person? Oh he dated so and so. Okay, I know who they are, like. It's kind of I don't know, easy way to be known.

As labels serve a purpose for others by helping them form quick impressions about their peers, even if they are false or misleading, getting rid of them becomes harder.

3.2.1.1.3 - Boys vs. Girls: Double standard

Most girls acknowledge the existence of a double standard in the outcomes faced by boys and girls who engage in sexual behaviours, pointing out that boys usually enjoy popularity and power while girls are labelled and judged. Brady points out that boys are free of the dangers faced by sexually active girls.

(And do guys get labelled anything for doing stuff?) No. *(Okay)* No nothing ever happens to the guys. It only happens so the guys, the guys could go and keep going, do anything with anyone and no one will ever come and label them or nothing.

Jessica and Kyra acknowledge that sexually active boys are not only free of risks but are actually receiving positive feedback from their peers, with each girl talking about

a different aspect of boys' behaviour. Jessica talks about the positive outcome of having multiple sexual partners.

(And does it work the same way for guys.) No. Guys are like they're applauded for that. It's yeah, guys are like, it's like apparently a good thing if you get more than one girl. *(Really?)* Mm-hmm.

Kyra points out that the boys are directly applauded for having sex while girls are looked down upon.

(So is it different for a guy to have sex in high school?) Oh yeah. A guy, it's like, "Oh yeah, man! You banged her!" Girls, it's like, "You're a fucking whore."

Jessica also discusses the implication of the double standard on what sexual behaviours boys and girls can and cannot do. According to Jessica, as a result of differential treatment of boys and girls, boys are at more liberty to engage in more sexual experiences.

(Um, are there other things that you can think of that's not okay for girls to do that is okay for boys to do?) Like you can't like, sleep with a lot of people. I mean it's not okay for guys to do that 'cause they're being man whores but you don't really say anything like, it's kind of like it's good for them to do that really, it isn't really fair to guys to actually make them like have to live up to that

‘cause... (*Sure, yeah.*) ...but like if a girl wanted to she couldn’t. But a guy ...if he’s capable [Laughing] of doing that, it’s good for him.

Very few girls discussed the use of labels against sexually active boys. One of them was Jessica, who, in the quote above, stated that although she thinks boys who have multiple sexual partners are “man whores” no one actually uses the label against them. Shannon, on the other hand, reports that boys in her school do get labelled, but that labelling actually carries a positive effect for boys.

(Okay and what about if a guy has sex with a whole bunch of girls?) Man whore.
(Man whore? And is that a good thing or a bad thing?) I think it’s a bad thing. I wouldn’t- be interested in a guy like that. *(And do guys think it’s a good thing or bad thing?)* I think they’re probably like, “Oh, yeah”.

Shannon’s opinion on boys who have multiple partners differs from that of her wider peer group, who think being a “man whore” is a good thing. But Shannon’s view remains a minority as her description of peer feedback converges with that of all other girls. Lauren specifically points to the existence of special power boys have over girls, which allows them to act as they do without experiencing negative consequences. She also acknowledges that boys’ power affects not only the consequences of sexual behaviour but also the overall interaction between boys and girls.

Girls try a lot harder than any guy does so I don't know, guys don't really need to get labelled. Or even if they are it doesn't matter. I don't know. But they do have some sort of power because they can't, they can sit there and call a girl a slut and then they don't care who knows it because other girls will still try and date them or like them or whatever.

Thus, for Lauren, due to the power boys have, they do not need to worry either about labelling or about making positive impressions on girls as they know they will be desired by girls regardless of what they do. Although Lauren is not able to further articulate the power dynamics or the origin of power differentials, her comment sheds light on the different realities faced by boys and girls. If girls like boys irrespective of boys' treatment of them, and if girls fight and offend each other in competition for boys' attention, it is understandable why boys would not be under threat of labelling and social derogation while girls would.

In their discussion of derogatory labelling as a consequence faced by girls who engage in various sexual activities, girls predominantly talked about what behaviours result in girls' labelling, pointing out the complexity of the factors that lead to it, as well as about the irreversible effect on labels, and the double standard about sexual behaviours between girls and boys.

It appears that over time sexualized labelling become more central in girls lives, as seen through the more elaborate discussion of the subject. When discussing the things that would lead to a girls' labelling, the rules became more complex and unclear, leaving girls with less control over their own labelling as they grow older, as can be seen both, by

girls' direct report of social rules as well as by the more elaborate discussion of the subject in the third wave of interviews. The irreversibility of labels too became more central in the later interviews, with girls not only alluding to the permanence of labels but also having insight to possible reasons, such as their informative function. Discussion of blame allocation for girls' labelling became less central in the later interviews; girls used more descriptive language of who is and who is not a 'whore' or a 'slut' but did not further the discussion of how the girls brought the label on themselves. This converges with the more elaborate discussion of the existence of a double standard about girls' and boys' sexual activities. In the later interviews girls appeared to have greater insight into power dynamics and into the differential use of labels. It is interesting to observe that in neither wave of interviews did girls mention that labelled girls possibly engaged in sexual behaviours out of choice to follow their sexual feelings. Statements of protection of labelled girls or portrayal of them as victims were also absent. Girls' attitudes towards labelled girls ranged from blame in the second wave to somewhat neutral or resigned in the third, which suggests that girls have been quite socialized to the prevailing social rules and power structure.

3.2.1.2 - Backstabbing friends: rumours and lies in girl fights

A few girls described that fighting among girls became more common and more physical. Particularly, girls mentioned physical fights, backstabbing friends, spreading rumours and lies as means through which girls tried to hurt each other in a fight. Brady describes how girls' fight tends to escalate.

(And do they actually fight as in physical fighting or like talking behind their back kind of fighting or combination?) Um, it's actually both. There's been quite a lot of fights lately between the girls and that and like girls would go and jump on the girls and everything (*Wow!*) and, like, (Small pause) girls will, like, yeah – they always will back stab but like it's not like back stabbing against like that so much friends now like it's becoming like family is back stabbing on each other.
(Really? Like sisters or something like that?) Yeah. And like cousins and that.

Brady reflects on being backstabbed and has been a victim of rumours and lies, all of which were related to her dating relationships and sexual experiences. One of the fights she had was with her cousin, who tried to separate her from her boyfriend by talking behind Brady's back.

My cousin, I remember last year she backstabbed me. (*Hmm! In what way?*) Well, she was just like talking all that stuff behind my back and like she kind of liked my boyfriend and everything and it was just getting into huge problems with us and she was saying all stuff behind my back and I was trying to ignore it, but started to get serious so we kind of like hated each other and then it ended up that we wanted to fight each other like physically.

Brady was also backstabbed by a friend who tried to “steal” her boyfriend from her.

[Her best friend] hung out with me like every single day and then when I first met him, I told her how much I liked him and like how much I wanted to go out with him and everything and then she actually stole him off my MSN list and started liking him and telling him how much she liked him and she was trying to ask him out so she was trying to steal him from me.

Brady tells that in response to her past experiences she does not let her friends know who her present boyfriend is as she wants to protect her relationship with the boy. However, she reports being victimized again by her friends by being told lies about her boyfriend in revenge for her choosing to spend the weekend with her boyfriend rather than coming to a sleepover at her friend's.

That Monday, she [a friend] came up, her and this other girl came up to me in bio class and told me that they knew something about my boyfriend but they wouldn't let me know and they were [Laughing] about it, (*Hmm*) And they like 'yeah we want to keep you worried' and all this stuff. (Wow!) But I didn't let it bother me or whatever. (*Right.*) And then I en.. I ended up getting all mad at him and everything and then they actually told me once I was mad at them. (*That they were just kidding or what?*) Yeah, they just told me, well they first lied and said that he was cheating on me... And they were just trying to make a big story to go with it and then they told me about it, that they're all lying about it and everything and just trying to get back at me.

Jessica too tells a story of being victimized by a false rumour of sexual content.

(So what I'm wondering um, like you said the ex-girlfriend had said some rumours about you.) Mm-hmm, yeah *(Are you comfortable sharing me, with me what that was about? What does it, was it related to?)* Well, she told like um, him that I was like a whore...and I was like cheating on him or going to cheat on him.

Her boyfriend's ex-girlfriend used false rumours to hurt Jessica and to try to separate her from her boyfriend. Jessica tells that she was hurt by the result of the rumour.

(What was that like hearing that somebody called you those names? Those are pretty strong words to use.) Yes, I was mad and then yeah, I was just 'cause she was I didn't even know her...And she was saying I was like who is this girl why is she saying this stuff about me...like, why does she care? And I was pretty pissed at the time.

From girls' stories it appears that girls often fight about sexuality-related issues, such as boyfriends, and try to hurt each other; they secretly compete with their friends for boys, spread false rumours, and tell each other lies about their boyfriends. Thus, girls' sexuality is often vulnerable for attack even from their friends. It appears that over time rumours and lies remained the primary ways girls hurt their peers in fights. However, it

also appears that overall girl fights became more frequent and more aggressive with physical fights between friends becoming more common. In the third wave of interviews more girls reported being victimized by rumours and lies. Also, in the later interviews girls reported often being victimized by their close friends as well as by other peers, whereas in the earlier interviews the victimizers tended to be peers only. The causes of fights also evolved; though they remained sexual in nature, the goal of lies and rumours was not only to hurt the victimized girls but also to break up her dating relationships and “steal” their boyfriends. Overall, as time passed, girls’ social contexts appeared to become more violent and unsafe, with close friends becoming a source of threat and danger.

3.2.1.3 - Pressure for sexual experiences

Most of the girls talked about the existence of different pressure dynamics between girls and boys in regards to sexual experiences. The most frequently identified directionality of pressure was from boys to girls; however, some girls also identified the existence of pressure among boys and among girls.

3.2.1.3.1 - Boys pressuring girls

Most of the girls identified the main source of pressure for sexual activities to be the boys, discussing the effects of pressure on girls’ sexual decision making. Jenna reports that boys often go through the hallways in her school asking girls to engage in sexual activities with them (e.g. oral sex).

(Some people I've talked to have told stories like where boys will say stuff in the halls to girls like um, that they want girls to do something to them or have um, does that ever happen?) Yeah, but it, they're like joking. (Okay. Um, does it happen often or once and while?) Not really often no. (Is it kind of the guys that are the players a bit more?) Yeah, I guess. (Yeah? What do girls say about it when it does happen?) They're just like no [Laughing]. ([Laughs] and do girls talk to each other about it? Like do you guys get annoyed or what happens?) Not really no, we don't really talk about it.

Although Jenna does not report feeling annoyed by boys' comments and reports that the boys' requests are made in a joking manner, the fact that girls are ought to repeatedly decline sexual offers and negotiate their sexuality may be a source of pressure. Some girls also refer to pressure as being the motivation behind girls' sexual experiences. Shannon says,

(I'm wondering and you may not know cause I don't how much they talked about it but I'm wondering what your sense is of what girls motivations are to have sex because there can be lots of different reasons.) Like pressure from guys.

What Shannon sees as the primary motivation for girls' sexual experiences is not girls' sexual desire or curiosity but pressure from boys. Some girls reported that many girls are afraid to object to the pressure and engaged in sexual experiences as a result of

their fear. Melissa perceives that some sexually active girls resign to pressure and then continue to be sexually active as a way of getting used to the activity.

Like I haven't really talked to someone who's ever like tried to say "no," but couldn't. (*Okay.*) But yeah, but yes probably like in their minds like sometimes they don't want to do things but they still do it. And then I guess eventually after a while it just doesn't seem like as big as a deal to them anymore.

Kyra and her boyfriend add that submission to pressure also involves fear, fear of saying "No" and getting raped, acknowledging that boys will try anything they can to get the girl to have sex with them.

(Do you think for most girls, like what, are there repercussions for saying "No". Like is it okay to say "No", if you don't like something or do you think a lot of girls don't say no?) They don't say anything. (*Why not?*) [Boyfriend: I think girls, they're afraid to.] Yeah, they're afraid to. [Boyfriend: They don't, I know one of them was like afraid to get raped. They'd rather do it but not really want to but not like try and resist. Then like actually, actually it happens.] Yeah. Yeah.
[Boyfriend: "Cause some guys are just like...] They're going to get it whatever way they can.

Kyra and her boyfriend state that girls prefer to abstain from saying "no" over trying to resist the boy's pressure, which indicates that girls do not believe that their

objection would be respected. Again, Kyra's and her boyfriend's description of the sexual act involves pressure and power, excluding agency and sexual desire; sexual activities just happen. Sarah's account on the roles pressure and sexual desire play in girls' sexual decision making is somewhat more ambiguous; although she does not explicitly indicate that girls engage in sexual activities out of pressure, her answer lacks desire as motivator while indicating that the leader of the sexual activity is the boy.

(How do you...do you think girls are good at knowing? Like it's a weird question but do you think girls are connected to knowing when they feel in the mood and when they don't or do you think it's hard to tell sometimes?) Eeh hard to tell but like I, I don't know. Like it...I think most cases are just like when one thing leads to the next. Like... I don't know. You're...you and your boyfriend are just making out and it kind of goes in that general direction maybe. *(And who do you think takes the lead in moving it in that direction?)* Guys.

Sarah's comment is somewhat different from those of the other girls' in that the existence of pressure is more implicit. It could be that girls described by Sarah are motivated by desire but that Sarah simply lacks the language to refer to desire as their motivator. However, the idea that sexual activities are the result of "one thing leading to the next" under boys' leadership could very well be Sarah's way to describe pressure.

3.2.1.3.2 - Boys pressure boys

Some girls noted that boys often pressure each other, which in turn contributes to the pressure boys put on girls. Jenna notes that pressure dynamics work in various ways between boys and girls.

(Like different um, expectations or different pressures?) Well I think like guys pressure more like guys pressure the girls but like guys pressure each other too. *(Mmmhmm, how does that happen and like what kind of things...)* Like I don't know, if you do it then you're all like a big man or whatever so... *(Yeah, so if you've been in a relationship for a while do people start asking? Do the guys start saying like...)* Yeah.

Jenna links the power and popularity experienced by sexually active boys with the pressure they put on each other; by praising sexual activities and repeatedly sharing information about each other's sexual experiences boys pressure each other to engage in sexual activities. Girls may thus be seen as a tool boys use in their attempt to secure social status. Kyra and her boyfriend too think that boys experience a significant degree of pressure from each other.

(And at that time [previous interview] you felt most people weren't ready, they were just curious and felt pressure to try it. And when you look back did that stay the same or did that change?) I think it's pressure I think it's totally pressure. [Boyfriend: I do too.] Pressure. [Boyfriend: Peer pressure. At least with guys –]

“Yeah, let’s bang.” [Boyfriend: No but like, amongst other guys] Yeah, it’s like competition. [Boyfriend: Yeah, exactly]

Kyra and her boyfriend state that not only the social status associated with sexual activity but the existence of competition over sexual experiences among boys is major sources of pressure among boys.

3.2.1.3.3 - Girls pressure girls, or do they?

The way pressure dynamics work among girls appears to be more complex; in fact, very few girls directly addressed this subject. Jessica tells a story about being dared by her girl-friend to kiss a boy she liked in the course of a game in class.

Um, actually, there was this one guy I really liked him, I just thought he was like cutest guy ever [Laughs]. And my friend, um, she was like I dare you to kiss him. And I didn’t really know him so I was like alright ...and I just kinda kissed him [Laughs]

Though Jessica liked the boy and enjoyed the opportunity, social games surrounding sexuality such as the one described by Jessica may be a source of pressure for sexual behaviours. On the other hand, when asked directly about the messages she receives from her female friends about having sex in her age, Jessica reports receiving mixed messages.

Well, out of my friends K(girl's name), she is like all for it, she's like well I didn't ask her I didn't be like yeah should I have sex? (*Right [Laughs]*) But she, she's a lesbian. But she wants to have sex and she thinks that like as long as you're doing it safe and you're not like screwing everyone around you that... you should probably go for it, if you feel you're ready for it. But then I have friends who are like, man that's slutty, you can't do that at that age.

Interestingly, Jessica used her friend's sexual orientation as a way to explain her friend's approval for becoming sexually active. Overall, however, it appears that Jessica faces different pressures from her friends; if she was to become sexually active, she would be accepted by some friends and criticized by others. When asked directly about pressures among girls Jenna stated that there is no pressure.

(Do you find that girls pressure each other? Like you should have sex like in the same way boys do?) No I don't think so. *(No. Um, not same for boys and girls in that way?)* Yeah

It is, thus, difficult to assert the pressure dynamics among the girls in the social contexts of the girls in this study. It is possible that the pressure among girls occurs in more indirect ways, via labelling and rumours, which pressure girls to not engage in sexual activities. Girls' discussions also suggest that pressure dynamics among girls vary from groups to group, depending, in part, on how much girls accept or resist the social norms and rules.

3.2.1.4 - *Changes in pressure over time*

One of the girls, Jenna, addressed the change in pressure for sexual behaviours over time, noting that as one gets older, the pressure increases and it becomes harder to resist the pressure.

(Um, hmm, oh yeah, we were talking about whether you think there's any more pressure for you as you get older in terms of your relationship or just in terms of sex like is it, do you think that it's harder as you get older?) Yeah I think so. (Yeah? Can you talk a little bit about that? Why do you think it gets harder?) I guess there's more pressure on you if you haven't when you get older and stuff like that. (Mmmhmm, yeah I've heard that from a lot of girls. What do you think about that?) I don't know, I think it's kinda stupid, like you'll do it when you're ready whatever.

While Jenna disapproves of the existence of pressure for sexual behaviours, she observes that with age, those who choose not to engage in certain behaviour face more pressure from their peers and thus, have a tougher reality. Overall, girls discussed a very complex system of pressure dynamics that involves and affects both, boys and girls. When looking at the change in girls' discussion of pressure for sexual experiences over time, Jenna's observation appears to represent most of the girls' experiences as the discussion of sexual pressure became more elaborate. More girls discussed the topic and more complex pressure dynamics emerged. In both waves of interviews, the pressure boys put on girls appeared most salient. In both waves, girls reported that many girls

engage in sexual activities out of pressure, subsequently regretting the experience. In both waves, girls also perceived pressure to be the main motivation for girls' sexual experiences, without acknowledging that girls could be motivated by their own sexual feelings. However, in the third wave of interviews, girls also discussed the impact of fear on girls' decisions, commenting that girls did not object to boys' initiation out of fear that they would not be respected. In the later set of interviews, girls also reflected on the pressure among boys and among girls. This has not been raised by girls in the earlier interviews. While this may reflect a genuine social change, it may also reflect girls' greater insight as they grew older. The latter appears as a more plausible explanation as girls in the earlier interviews did reflect on the way boys praise and compete with each other about their sexual experiences when discussing the double standard of sexualized labelling. Further, in their discussion of sexual pressure, the role of sexual feelings in girls' sexual experiences was minor at best, ranging from claiming that girls do not have sexual feelings (earlier interviews) to being linked to lesbians (later interviews). Overall, pressure dynamics appear to have an increasingly dominant role in girls' social contexts as they mature and become more complex and ambiguous.

3.2.1.5 - Pressure for long-term dating relationships

Many girls discussed the existence of pressure to be in long-term monogamous relationships. While some girls discussed the pressure as a result of relationships being the only acceptable place for girls' sexual experiences, other girls related experiencing direct peer-pressure to establish dating relationships.

3.2.1.5.1 - Dating relationship as the only safe place for sexual experiences

Some girls linked the use of sexualized labels with the relationship status of girls. When asked about the difference between a girl who engages in sexual behaviours and is labelled from a girl who engages in sexual experiences but is not labelled, Melissa states that what matters is the girl's relationship status.

(So if, like if a girl actually does do stuff with a guy, at what point is it okay that she's doing stuff with a guy versus she becomes a slut?) Well I think people I guess, say that they should be like seeing the person and they should be boyfriend girlfriend and only with one person and I guess that's kinda like the way people think and I don't know [Chuckle].

Shannon too states that sexual experiences within a long-term monogamous relationship do not result in derogatory labelling.

(Like what if someone's in a longer-term relationship with a guy?) I think it's more like considered okay if, if it's one guy that they've been dating for a long time.

The message Melissa and Shannon report receiving is that if girls want to engage in sexual behaviours while remaining label-free, the only way for them to achieve this is by establishing a dating relationship with a boy first and dating the boy for a certain period of time. Girls cannot, thus, react to their desire in a more immediate way or

engage in sexual experiences without having dating relationships with their partner first if they wish to avoid the consequences of sexual labelling. Although the girls did not report this factor as a direct point of pressure to engage in dating relationships, I see this as a source of pressure as it limits girls' freedom of action.

3.2.1.5.2 - Social enforcement of dating relationships

Melissa alludes to the social enforcement of monogamous relationships, being another point of pressure to remain in dating relationships one initiates. Melissa reports boys and girls are often observing and commenting on the behaviour of boys and girls who are in long-term dating relationships, discouraging much of the interaction (particularly flirting) with other boys and girls.

(So, speaking about relationships, what do you think are the messages about being in a relationship at your age? Like, what kind of other pressures are-) Um, just like if you're in a relationship with someone that's, like...that's who you're with and you're not supposed to do it with anyone else.

Some girls reported receiving direct messages from their peers, pressuring them to establish a formal dating relationship with boys with whom they had informal relationships. Melissa reports "seeing" a boy during the time of the interview. She states that she does not want to date the boy because she sees a dating relationship as a commitment and she stated having too many other things she wants to do except for

spending time with a boyfriend. Melissa describes the pressure she feels from her friends about establishing a dating relationship with this boy.

Like, I'm just, like...I don't know. I like him, he likes me, and that's all that matters. (*Exactly, yeah. Yeah.*) Yes, I ... it always makes me mad when people are just like: "well, what's going on?" I'm like: "wh... what do you mean?" Like, we both like each other. They're all like... "Well, are you guys going to date?" "I don't know". Aren't we, like, pretty much ... like, I don't know"

Melissa also reports that people view her choice as an abnormal one, not seeing her rational for not establishing a dating relationship as valid.

.... People are always like "What's wrong with you? Why don't you just go out with someone already?"

Although she appears to know what she does and does not want, her peers' comments seem to influence Melissa's perception of the situation and lead her to doubt her decision about the nature of her relationship.

Or maybe I'm just, like, making, like, a- too much of a deal, like, thinking, like, a boyfriend means, like – I don't know. Maybe I'm just making a big deal, rather, like, I can just, like, whatever - go out with someone. But I don't know.

Melissa seems to be confused by her peers' comments and notes being upset by the frequent queries about the nature of the relationship and by the persistent expectation on behalf of her peers that the relationship she has ought to evolve into a dating one. Lauren too is in a relationship with someone but does not label the relationship as a dating one. She too reports that her friends often comment on the subject, saying that she is, in fact, dating.

Yeah, it's hard 'cause like we, we don't actually go on like dates, we just kinda hang out and then.... Whatever else [Laughing]. But like, I don't know, it's just, I, there's so much that would come with it, like all my friends are like, you are, and I'm like no I'm not [Laughing].

Lauren also comments that she has experienced this kind of pressure in the past as well, with a particular friend constantly asking her about why she was not dating a boy with whom she appears to get along so well, hinting that the natural progression of her relationship with the boy should be a dating relationship.

He's always been kind of like the, looking around, he always would be like yeah, seeing what's going on with me and ... I don't know he used to, he used to just make fun of us all the time because that's the way he was, he had his girlfriend and he was like, oh yes, you guys aren't dating yet? And he always used to make comments like that just because it was him and he could.

Presently, while Lauren is happy with the status of her relationship as it is, she is forced to constantly redefine her relationship against the label of a dating relationship in response to the comments of her peers. Thus, pressure for girls to engage in long-term monogamous relationships comes in various forms; girls experience indirect pressure by acknowledging that the only safe way to engage in sexual experiences is while being in a dating relationship, and a direct pressure from the comments of their friends about their interaction with boys while being in a dating relationship and about their undefined relationships with boys. Generally speaking, the social messages about monogamy have not changed over time. In both waves of interviews, girls refer to both, indirect messages, namely that only within a dating relationship can girls engage in sexual behaviours and remain label-free, and direct messages, namely the explicit comments of their peers about their behaviour and relationship status. What is interesting to note is that in the earlier interviews some girls referred to sexual feelings as motivators for dating relationships, displaying socialization to the message that sexuality is acceptable only within a monogamous relationship. In the later interviews, girls only discussed the safety of relationships in the context of labelling.

3.2.1.6 - Equality rules: virgins = no virgins

Sarah's story was the only one to stand out as portraying equal treatment of girls irrespective of their sexual experiences. Sarah talks about acceptance of all girls and denies the link between labelling and sexual experiences. When asked about what it means to be a virgin at her age Sarah says,

I don't know. I don't...like I don't know. It's something like everyone accepts it.

I mean no one I know has really ever said like, oh, my God. You're what? Like you know what mean? Like it's never really a big deal. (*And that's another question I had was are girls treated differently who are virgins or not virgins?*)

I'm going to say definitely not. (*Okay.*) Definitely not.

As mentioned above, in Sarah's social context, labels are not associated with girls' experiences but with what they share about them. Also, girls who are not sexually active are not subject to judgement or increased pressure. Sarah's comments about girls' and boys' equality cannot be related to her or other girls' stories from the previous wave of interviews. On the one hand, Sarah's comment reveals that it is possible that there are some social contexts where judgement on girls' behaviour is not as harsh and where girls experience more freedom. However, given that perception of social rules is the result of the reporter's interpretation, it is possible that Sarah's view may not be shared by other girls in her social group. Overall, it is important to note Sarah's reporting that girls' treatment by their peers is irrespective of their sexual experiences as it represents one girl's perception of her social context.

3.2.1.7 - Sexualized interactions between girls and boys

Some of the girls observed that much of the relationships between boys and girls have a sexualized character. Girls characterized relationships between boys and girls in terms of flirting, attention seeking, maintaining impressions and putting on shows to

impress. Kelly describes the casual interactions she observes between some girls and boys in school whom she classifies as friends.

Girls my age are very much trying to impress the guys. They'll wear basically nothing and piles of makeup, piles of makeup on, sorry, and they'll spend hours doing their hair and everything and come to school for a couple of hours, and so flirty, it's annoying, it's like okay. Even when you know the guys aren't interested, like you can sometimes, sometimes the guys are just as bad, with flirting and everything. But other times you can just see the guys are like kind of rolling eyes or they're standing with a group of their buddies and the friends or the girls in their grade and everything. Although they're friends with them they come over and start being all raunchy and stuff like that. You could just see them. (*What does that mean, like being raunchy? What is that like?*) Like all over the place, they'll be grabbing onto their arms and pulling at them and just like all over the place.

According to Kelly's description, the borders between friendship and sexual partnering are quite blurred. Kelly also observes a difference between how boys and girls in a group of friends behave. She observes that girls are the ones who more frequently flirt with the boys; they also invest in their appearance and adopting seductive behaviours, even without reinforcing cues from the boys. Elsewhere in the interview Kelly further discusses the differences between boys and girls in her school.

I find the girls are more all over the guys than the guys are all over the girls. Like the guys do it from a distance. Like they'll be talking with their friends and they'll check the girls out and everything. But the girls are like, they're always like touching their arms and stuff like that and they'll be like oh ha, ha, and they'll touch their arm or they'll grab onto their sleeve or they'll hug their arm like that just friends. They're just all over the place.

Kyra and her boyfriend too notes that between boys and girls, girls often play a more active role in giving the relationship a sexualized flavour and often alter their characters. They describe a particular girl whom they find to be quite characteristic of how girls act around boys.

[Boyfriend: And like there's like girls like KS(girl's name), like make themselves dumber so] So they fit in. [Boyfriend: Yeah, so they think they can like they try and be funny.] So dumb. (*And who are they trying ... like who are they changing for? Like when they act dumber, who is it for? Who is the audience?*) I think some are just trying to get guys attention. But I'm like "Oh My God! What is that?"

According to Kyra and her boyfriend, girls try to modify themselves and appear differently in front of their group of friends in order to get their friends' attention, possibly altering their friendship into a sexual relationship. Again, the borders between

friendships and broader peer groups are blurred as boys in general become potential partners.

Interestingly, Kelly observes that although many girls engage in similar behaviours in relation to boys, they are not approving of each other's behaviours and often criticise each other.

(Do girls comment about when they other girls flirting or?) Yeah, actually.

They'll talk bad about this girl was like, "Oh she was all over him" and stuff like that. But then a guy walks by and they're all the same thing, so.

This creates yet another ambiguous reality for the girls; flirting with boys and altering one's appearance and presentation is both, acceptable and unacceptable by their peer groups. Jessica discusses her personal experiences with other boys, also demonstrating the sexualized nature of the relationships between boys and girls.

But now like almost everything we do is like, there's like a line and like well he's a guy should I be flirting with him? Because like, I don't know you're attracted to the opposite sex and you're really aware of the fact that you're talking to someone of the opposite sex...and like you might not be attracted to them but you know that like, like yeah that's it a boy and he's cute...and you have to talk to him [Laughing]. *(It sounds almost like um, correct me if it doesn't fit but almost more of a performance now when you're with boys?)* Yeah... *(Is that...)* except for like my friends like yeah, they're like, with them it's just kinda like whatever but....

While Jessica differentiates between her close friends and other boys, she acknowledges that her interactions with boys that are not friends are usually sexually charged, involve a performance as well as a checking-in about the levels of attraction between her and the boy. Although Jessica notes that her flirting is usually motivated by her sexual feelings (finding a boy to be “cute” she also notes that she needs to strategize about the performance she puts on when choosing to interact with the boy. Shannon too alluded to the performance aspect of the flirtatious relationships she observes between boys and girls.

(I'm wondering about the girls you see at your age um, the girls who maybe have boyfriends or are flirting. If you were to describe how those girls feel when they're with boys, what do you think they would say?) Um I don't know. There's probably pressure and they may not feel like they're being themselves around them.

In addition to the acting aspect of the flirtatious interactions, Shannon adds that she perceives that there is a level of pressure on girls to flirt or to sexualize the interactions between girls and boys. In the context of other pressures mentioned, such as pressure for sexual experiences and pressure for dating relationships, and in light of the power boys have, as noted by some girls, it is possible that girls feel pressure to act in a particular way to draw boys' attention and to consequently gain power by association with them. Overall, it is interesting to observe that many of the interactions between boys

and girls have a sexualized character to them which is often imposed by girls more than by boys despite the danger of labelling and the pressures that ensue from flirtatious behaviour as well as labels. Although in some cases it appears that girls are sexualizing interaction due to their own sexual feelings and interests, in other cases, girls may be pressured to assume certain behaviours.

It seems that sexualized interaction that involves flirting and performance may be a continuation of what girls discussed about sexual communication in the public space. In the earlier interviews, girls discussed open comments girls and boys made about finding each other attractive and being “horny”. Specifically, some girls discussed girls being very open and overt about their sexual feelings. It is possible that as time passed words turned into action as girls became more “flirtatious” and “attention seeking”, a process that could be motivated by the alluded pressure and power dynamics discussed by girls in the later interviews.

3.2.1.8 - Relationship as source of social power

Most of the girls related to sexuality as a source of power, particularly for boys, specifically referring to sexual experiences. This has been mentioned elsewhere in the study (e.g., Slut/Whore – Double standard). One girl, Jenna, makes an association between relationship status and power, stating that having a “hot” boyfriend or a “hot” girlfriend gives people pride and power and that girls want to have “hot” boyfriends to “brag about”. She describes what girls do in order to get a “hot” boyfriend.

(Um, so what kinds of things do girls do to keep up with that? 'Cause that's a lot of pressure, like if you want to have a boyfriend, and you want your boyfriend to like you and be able to brag about you. What kinds of things do girls do to keep up with that?) I don't know they just change their way of dressing and like acting and looking and stuff like that. (They change their way of dressing, being more...) More feminine or whatever. (More feminine, so more pink, more skirts.) Yeah. (... Tighter looser?) Tighter I think.

For girls to gain the power associated with having a “hot” boyfriend, according to Jenna, a girl ought to change her appearance and behaviour. Given that tighter and more revealing clothes are often associated with sexual labelling and social judgement, girls who try to attract a “hot” boyfriend are at risk. Thus, the power of having a “hot” boyfriend often comes with a price. While the existence of differential power dynamics between girls and boys permeates girls’ stories in both, earlier and later interviews, overt comments about power distribution and its effects are limited. Given that assertions about the role of power in girls’ and boys’ realities require substantial insight, it is possible that in the earlier interview girls were unable to articulate thoughts and observations about power yet. In the third wave of interviews, a few girls mention power dynamics (e.g., Lauren in her discussion of the double standard of sexual labelling). However, only Jenna links the alternation of girls’ behaviour with the associated power with having a “hot” boyfriend.

3.2.1.9 - *Stereotype of the a-sexual girl*

Some girls alluded to the existence of the stereotype that girls are or ought to be a-sexual, disinterested in sexual behaviours. Such stereotype appears to then colour how girls' behaviours are interpreted. Jessica and Lauren make rather explicit references to such stereotype. Jessica points out the contrast between the stereotype around girls' and boys' sexuality.

(Like if, I mean if we think in terms of the stereotype for guys is that they're thinking about sex all the time right?) Yeah. (What would be the stereotype for girls?) Probably that they don't want it.

Jessica appears to be aware of the stereotype in her social context and connects it to her observations of boys and girls. Lauren too discusses the existence of the stereotype, or stigma, in her context and its persistence of the over time.

(Yeah. So there still is definitely like that stigma around that girls are supposed to sort of remain.) Yeah. The white wedding-type girl. And then the guys don't need to have a white wedding. [Laughing]

Lauren also observes the effect of the stigma on the judgement of boy's and girl's behaviours, noting that due to the label sexually active girls are judged as engaging in sexual experiences for boys, not out of own sexual feelings.

Um, well, you have like girls that are obviously involved with many guys, that kind of thing. You get called names or just get to know, get known as the girl that will do this or that or whatever or will date anybody or whatnot.

In the context of the stigma that girls ought to be or are a-sexual, girls behaviour is then judged as motivated externally; a girl who has had various experiences and multiple partners was motivated by her interest to gain something else, other than sexual pleasure. Although only two girls mentioned the stereotype directly and linked it to the way girls' behaviours are judged, their comments are insightful for the understanding of the other girls' experiences and stories as they shed light on what could motivate the judgement, sexual labelling, and the pressures. Although in earlier interviews some girls did mention that girls do not have sexual feelings or that girls' motivation for sexual experiences is not sexual, the discussion of the stereotype of girls as being a-sexual is unique to the later interviews and particularly to Lauren's and Jessica's comments. Overall, Lauren and Jessica appeared to have greater insight into the rules regarding to sexuality in their social contexts, which may have contributed to their observation about the operation of stereotypes.

3.2.1.10 - Pregnancies and STIs in girls' social contexts

Some girls reported witnessing teen pregnancies in their social contexts. Sarah discusses that having a baby is a reality of girls around her.

(I'm wondering at your age, so seventeen, I'm wondering if, if you know any girls who have been pregnant or have found themselves in that situation?) Well, not any of my friends but E(girl's name), a girl that she used to go to school with, I think just had...just had a baby. *(Wow. ... And how old was she?)* I think she was...is, she's seventeen.

Brady too reports seeing girls pregnant in her school and reports that a potential pregnancy is a real concern for her as she objects abortions.

(At your age are you finding lots of people are having sex or are a lot of people waiting?) A lot of people are. *(Yeah.)* There is a couple girls who are 15 at school and they're like six months pregnant. It's actually really bad. I have a friend who is actually 15 who actually found out last week that she was pregnant. And like if I were every to get pregnant, which I hope I don't until I'm over 18- uh, I would never get an abortion. I think those are so bad. Why would you want to kill your own kid. So, but she's not going to get an abortion, so she's going to keep the kid. But being a 16 year old mother is not good. *(That would be hard.)* A lot of girls are getting pregnant now.

Brady also explains why she thinks so many girls are getting pregnant at her age.

(Do you its like are people not learning how to use protection or people being careless or?) Uh, well its because girls will go on birth control and they'll use it

for their period and for protection, but then they won't go on it for a bit and then they'll go and have sex without a condom and then they'll find out that they're pregnant. Because the birth control didn't help them because they stopped using it.

Brady raises the concern for STIs, reporting that she and her peers are not very concerned about diseases as they do not believe that they are as much of a real threat as they are said to be.

(And like so there's the whole like worry about pregnancy, but then what about things like sexually transmitted diseases. Do they talk to you guys about that at all?) They do, but I don't know, I guess we don't believe that now you can get that kind of stuff. *(Really?)* Yeah.... 'cause, like a lot of people who do have sex don't get it, so we think that you can't get that. *(Yeah. So do people think...why do people think there is the concern to use condoms? Do they think that that's made up-so that kids won't have sex?)* Yeah.

Pregnancy appears to be part of many of the girls' realities (as they witness peers getting pregnant). In light of the socially complex realities girls face in relation to their sexuality and sexual experiences, lack of information about pregnancy and birth control may further complicate girls' sexual decision making. The fact that STIs appeared an even lesser concern points to not only greater lack of information but to an increased risk to girls' health. The discussion of pregnancy and STIs appeared in the later interviews

only; in earlier interviews, girls did not discuss the role pregnancies and STIs played in their social groups, possibly as girls were too young at the time.

3.2.1.11 - Summary of sexuality in the context of peers and friends

The themes that emerged in the later wave of interviews resembled most of the themes in earlier interviews. Girls discussed sexual labelling more elaborately, revealing more complex rules and more ambiguity around what leads to labelling and how labels are used. Overall, sexual labels appeared to play more central role in girls' lives as they grew older. Girls also discussed rumours and lies in their lives, reporting being personally victimized by their close friends as well as wider peer groups, usually for causes related to sexuality and dating relationships. Girls also discussed experiencing a number of pressures, namely, pressure for sexual experiences and pressures for long-term relationships. Uniquely to the third wave of interviews were discussions of girls' and boys' equality, social power, and stereotype of a-sexual girl. In the earlier interviews, girls discussed friends and peers as being their main source of information about sexuality, a theme that did not re-emerge in the later interviews.

3.2.2 - Family

When talking about their relationships with their families in relation to their sexual experiences and dating relationships, girls described their families as being either distant, with girls having limited communication about their dating and sexual experiences with their families, or being a source of support for girls. In comparison to the previous wave of interviews, references to families as source of pressure or as barrier

to sexuality and dating were much less frequent. Girls also talked about general messages they receive from their parents about dating relationships and sexuality, which were conveyed through rules and through modelling of relationships.

3.2.2.1 - Secrets and distance: Limited communication

Some girls reported their families to be quite uninvolved in their dating and sexual experiences and stated that they would not approach their family members to talk about their experiences or discuss their observations. Jenna reports that she feels more comfortable talking with her friends than with her family members about her observation about the double standard regarding sexuality for boys and girls.

(How do you guys talk about it? Like do you say like, do you point out that double standard or?) Yeah. (Mmmhmm. What kind of things do girls say?) Just that it's stupid and stuff. (Mmmhmm, yeah. Have you ever talked about that with your sister or your mom or?) No [Laughs]. (No? Just with your girlfriends?) Yeah.

Brady also reports feeling more comfortable to talking with someone other than her family, her boyfriend, about anything, including sexuality-related topics. Brady has an insight into why she may feel more comfortable with her boyfriend; she believes that the generation gap between her and her mother acts as a barrier to their open communication.

I can actually talk to him about any ... anything like I feel comfortable, I can express myself more to him than I can with like my mom or anybody else.... (*And that feels like a good thing?*) I guess he understands lot of it just because he is a teenager too. And like a lot of things like from now, like from now from when my mom was young like it's so different. (*Uh, um, for sure.*) So..., speaking to like him is like speaking to a sibling. (*Yeah.*) Like I got brothers so... I'm not going to bring it up with my brothers so I guess they don't really care.

Although Brady notes that her boyfriend and her brothers are of the same age, she also acknowledges that she has different relationships with them, which make her boyfriend a safer person to talk to. Overall, for whatever reasons, girls often feel more comfortable to discuss their experiences and observations with people other than their families. As Brady points out, generation gap could be one of the reasons.

3.2.2.2 - Openness, support and guidance

Some of the girls pointed to positive ways their families impact their dating relationships and sexual experiences. Some girls noted feeling comfortable to share their experiences, and some discussed the helpfulness of families' attitudes and their supportiveness. Shannon discusses her close relationship with her mother and says that she feels comfortable approaching her mother about any matter, including sexuality-related issues.

(If you had questions, who would you go to? Is there anyone that you could talk to or is it more just, ah, no?) Um I don't know. I'm pretty open with my mom.

(That's cool. Mm-hm. And is that helpful?) Yes. It feels like I'm actually friends sort of. We can talk and like she knows my daily situation. Like I like to keep her in the like loop of my life. I know that's probably like so not normal for a lot of girls (I think it's amazing.) Yeah. A lot of my friends like almost think it's like weird how close my family is. Um L(girl's name) and T(girl's name) and K(girl's name) probably can't- like they can't wait to get rid of their brothers and like L(girl's name) honestly she would be even happy never to see her brother again.

(Okay. Okay. Yeah, so not happy.) But we're somehow really close.

Shannon acknowledges that such an open relationship is rare as most of her friends are experiencing difficulties with their families, but says she appreciates having such open relationship with her mother and the rest of her family. Kelly too reports having an open communication with her mother, which is exemplified in their experiences at a musical.

Talking about boys like I was talking with my mom last night when we were at Grease. There was this guy with a blue shirt. He was like, he wasn't one of the main characters but he was always dancing and singing on screen and then there was one part where he was the main focus and I couldn't take my eyes off of him. He was so cute. I went on and on about how cute he was

Not being afraid of any sort of disapproval, Kelly reports feeling comfortable comment on other men to her mother. Kelly also discusses that she feels very comfortable to talk with her family about her boyfriend; she tells the story of how her boyfriend stayed to sleep over for the first time.

(Yeah. And did you, the first time that he slept here, did you negotiate with your mom or how did that conversation happen?) She was honestly fine with it, like she trusts me and everything. She trusts him, so. (Yeah, yeah. Okay. And does he sleep in the same room with you?) Yeah. (And is that something that you have to talk with your mom about or is that assumed?) Well at first she was like I don't know and everything and then I talked to her and she trusts me. She knows I'm going to be fine and everything. She knows I'm not going to be doing anything and if I was to she knows I'd be safe and stuff like that.

Given their open communication and trust, Kelly felt comfortable negotiating her boyfriend's sleep-over with her mother. Kelly reports that she feels more comfortable to talk about her boyfriend with her family even more than with her friends.

I like talking about me and my boyfriend and stuff like that with my family. I don't want to bore my friends or annoy my friends, so I tend not to talk about it, unless they ask. Then if they ask, then that's a bad mistake because then I'll go on and on or something like that.

Some girls discussed the supportive attitude of their parents towards their dating relationships, which made it easier for the girls to maintain their relationships. Jenna reports that having older siblings who have gone through dating relationships made her parents more supportive of her own relationships. When talking about her family's attitude towards her boyfriend Jenna says,

(So what was it like the first time you had him over?) It was fine [Laughs].... *(Did you, 'cause you're the youngest in the family did you get teased at all or?)* No, not really 'cause they have, they went through all that with like my brothers and sister and stuff so. *(Okay, so it was a little bit easier for you maybe?)* Yeah.

Lauren and Melissa, who are both "seeing" boys but do not have titles to their relationships, relate that their families are supportive of their relationships and do not put pressure on them. Lauren, who has not introduced her partner to her family, describes her family's attitude towards her relationship.

(Is it official enough that he was like, met your parents, or you met his family and yours?) Um, no. [Laughs] Like they know but they haven't like actually met him yet. Because it just hasn't been, like we haven't gone on official dates. I'm just like oh I'm hanging out with my friend S(boy's name) and they're just like, okay. But now they kind of, they know. And they're just like "Well, we'll meet him"
[Laughing] And I'm like, yeah. It's been more like really recently that's it kinda

come out as a thing. (*Okay, yeah.*) So they told me that they will meet him and they probably will. [Laughing]

Lauren's family does not appear to pressure her to decide whether she is dating the boy or not or demands to meet him, which allows Lauren take the relationship in the pace and direction of her interest. Melissa experiences a similar feedback from her own family in regards to her relationship with a boy she is "seeing" (not dating).

(And do ... like does he come over here and do you parent know him and stuff like that?) Yeah. (Yeah. Do your parents bug you like "what's going on?" Do they want the title?) No, well not really. (No?) Mostly, just- yeah. They say like: "Oh, Melissa" ... like Jamie has, like, a steady boyfriend who, like- They've been together for so long and then there's me, who's just like [Laughing] You know? They're just like "Melissa has 10 boyfriends, we don't know, we don't keep track anymore".

Melissa's parents' supportiveness of both of their daughters and the lack of pressure for a title allow Melissa to establish the relationship that suits her sexual and romantic interests. Melissa's family also appears to trust Melissa and accept her partner, allowing him to visit Melissa without interrogating her and him about his character. Kelly too talks about her family's acceptance of her boyfriend, which she values greatly.

Oh yeah, I talk about him all the time with my family. The thing that I absolutely love is that he is very close with my family. Like he gets along great with my sisters. Him and my step-dad are like best friends, they're car guys so they're always car talk blah blah blah blah. And like he's really close with my mom. And he was very close with my grandma and my grandpa. And when my grandpa died he was really hurt by it too.

Kelly provides an example of how her boyfriend feels comfortable in her home.

Like he just feels so comfortable here that he kicks his shoes off at the back door. He comes and he lounges on the couch. He doesn't care if my sisters are on the couch or not. He'll lay on top of them or something. Like, he can joke around with my sisters.

Some girls also discussed their parents as being in guidance role, either modeling behaviours girls would like to adapt or behaviours girls would like to alter in their own relationships. Kyra and her boyfriend discuss the influence of parental modelling on children's relationships in general.

[Boyfriend: Like that helps, like how you're raised. Like if you see your dad treat your mom like crap -] Then you're going to carry that. [Boyfriend: Yeah. And if you see like your dad like bringing flowers home, you know like you'll just think that's right. And I was at a young age it develops. I think anyway. (So

what do you think?) I think you have to be brought up that way, 'cause if you're brought up being a dick then you'll be a dick.

Melissa reflects on her parents' relationship, learning from it what she would not like to see in relationships she does and will have. Seeing that her mother has the upper hand in family decision-making, Melissa wishes to establish more open and egalitarian relationships.

(What have you learned from, like, about relationships from seeing your parents? What have you learned about the way they interact that you like or don't like? That you would want in a relationship, or not want.) I don't- It seems like my dad will just do, like, whatever- Like no matter what, if he thinks it's wrong, or like- My mom runs the show it seems like. *(Really?)* And I don't really like that sometimes because I agree with my dad more..... *(Like in what way would you want to be in a relationship?)* Like, I would never want to be like that. Like, if someone doesn't agree with something, I don't want them to be just like- Like, some things I guess just, like, aren't worth fighting over. So, like- And I don't really know if, like, it's for all the big things. It's like mom is just like- her way goes.

The way families supported their daughters in their sexual and dating experiences varied for different girls; girls valued the open communication, the trust, the inexistence of pressure and the acceptance of their relationships and their partners. Girls also saw

their parents' relationships as learning opportunities, reflecting on what their parents model and on what they would like to see in their own relationships.

3.2.2.3 - Messages and rules regarding sexuality and dating

Rules parent have regarding girls' dating relationships and sexual behaviours appeared to be the main way parents not only "safeguarded" their daughters but also transmitted messages about what they consider appropriate and what they would not accept. Lauren retrospectively discusses her parents' ruled about earlier dating relationships in grade nine.

Officially my parents told me I was not allowed to date until I was 15. (*Okay.*) But. (*Unofficially.*) Yeah. So I didn't really go by that. I didn't really tell them [Laughs]. (*Do they know that now or no?*) Yeah, they know now. Now they're like, "I remember that boy that used to call here and you used to talk to him all the time... Yeah, well. Are you kidding me?" [Laughs].

The message behind the rules Lauren's parents had was that girls should be at a certain age and a certain maturity level before engaging in relationships with boys. Dating relationships prior to age of 15 were not acceptable. Her parents' rules did not prevent Lauren from dating, however, and her parents did not punish her for breaking their rules when they found out, years later, about her grade-nine boyfriends. Jessica

reports that her parents have some rules around her current dating relationship. She compares her parents to her friends' parents and approves of her parents' approach.

Well, my mom she's a mom, but I don't think she's overly strict. Like my friend's mom, she's not allowed to go anywhere and stuff.... Like, if she's going to a birthday party she needs an invitation and stuff. (*Oh, okay.*) Like so I think I'm pretty good with that like, I mean my parents have to be home if I want my boyfriend to come over. But we're allowed to go up to my room and stuff. (*Great, yeah.*) Like it's just like, I'm not like monitored 24/7 but I'm not like allowed to go out at 1 in the morning and get drunk and come home. (*Yeah.*) I think it's any average... teenager schedule

Jessica links her parents' rule that her boyfriend can visit only when her parents are home to their disapproving attitude to sexual activities at her age.

(*Um, have you gotten any messages around that you should wait or that...*) From my parents? (*Yeah.*) Yeah of course [Laughs] (*Yeah?* [Laughs]) Yeah, my mom like doesn't want us alone together and stuff. So you just kinda get it from that.

However, reporting that she and her parents do not normally discuss sexuality, Jessica does not believe that her parents' rules would affect her decision about whether to have sex or not.

I don't really, they're alright with me having a boyfriend. But I don't think they'd be like too happy with, if I were to have sex. But I probably wouldn't tell them.

Thus, Jessica acknowledges that the underlying message behind her parents' rules is that they would not approve of Jessica becoming sexually active at her age, irrespective of her relationship status or feelings. However, the existence of rules and their underlying message are not seen by Jessica as a barrier to sexual activity as she acknowledges the possibility of secrecy and non-disclosure. Kelly reports receiving a rather different message from her mother; Kelly's mother does not disapprove of sex at her age altogether, but approves sex if it occurs within a long term dating relationship. Kelly, who reports having sex with her boyfriend at 14 and concealing it from her mother out of embarrassment, talks about how she eventually told her mother about it.

And so I thought of what I was going to say and I said really really fast, "Mom, Aaron and I had sex, just after dating for a year while I was still 14 and I'm really, really... and I'm not going to do it for a long time and I'm really, really sorry."

And I said that all in two seconds and she looked at me and I burst into tears. And she said, "What are you talking about Kelly?" And then I said it a little slower and I caught it and she was like, "You did it, oh my God." Like my mom was really disappointed in my sister because they had only been dating for a couple months and she wasn't happy about it. So I was starting to feel oh my God, is she going to be disappointed in me. And she was just so supportive and she didn't turn, didn't look down on me. She said, "That's okay, you had been together for over a year

and you know that you didn't want to do it so you're not just, you're not doing anything you don't want to do. And Aaron I love you so much kid” and everything. And, “Don't worry, I'm not going to think bad about you or anything. You're very supportive and I'm so proud of you for not pushing my daughter into anything.”

The message behind Kelly's mother is both, validating and invalidating. While she did not condone Kelly's behaviour and showed support, she also indicated that sex should be a function of the dating relationship, irrespective of one's sexual feelings. The fact that Kelly thought she was ready for it without realizing she was not and her association of sex with embarrassment and not with pleasure did not bother her mother. In sum, parental various rules regarding their daughter's sexual and dating experiences were interpreted by girls to reflect their parents' attitudes. The effectiveness of parental rules' abilities to influence girls' behaviour appeared to be limited, however, with girls concealing experiences they thought their parents would disapprove. As seen through Kelly's experience, although girls may make independent decisions, they are still likely to be affected by the risk of parental disapproval and disappointment.

3.2.2.4 - Summary of sexuality in the context of family

In the later wave of interviews, girls primarily discussed ways in which their families remained uninvolved in their sexual and dating relationships, their families' openness about their experiences, and their families' rules and messages about their sexual experiences and dating relationships. The way girls discussed their families in the

context of their sexual relationships reflected a process of separation from the family and increasing independence. In the earlier interviews, girls mostly discussed their families as a source of barrier and pressure to sexual experienced and dating relationships, which indicates the heightened level of control parents asserted over their children. In the later interviews, girls' discussion of their families as source of barriers and rules became less central, and girls talked about their families as source of support or as being uninvolved and distant. With regards to parental rules about girls' dating and sexual relationships, although the underlying message remained constant across the interviews, namely, that girls should abstain from sexual experiences, the amount of control such rules have diminished as time passed by. For some of the girls, families remained their source of information about sexuality and a safe place for the discussion of their dating relationships; as girls underwent more experiences they felt increasingly comfortable to bring them to their family circles. For other girls, as they underwent various experiences they also became more distant from their families, either by not sharing their experiences or by exercising more control over their experiences or behaviours.

3.2.3 - Partner

When girls talked about their sexuality and their sexual experiences within their various relationships, many themes resembled what the girls talked about in the previous interviews. In this wave of interviews girls mostly discussed experiences of pressure within their relationships, the ways they make sexual decisions as well as the factors that influence their decision-making, their communication with their partners about sexuality, and effect if having partners on their feelings towards their bodies.

3.2.3.1 - Negotiating pressure for sexual experiences

Sexual pressure within the relationship appeared to play an important role in girls' relationships, with most of the girls stating that they do not feel pressure in their present relationships. Some girls related that lack of pressure was crucial for the strength of their relationships, stating that it helps them feel comfortable with their partners. Jessica relates that she experienced pressure from a past boyfriend whom she dated for a few days in grade nine, a year prior to the interview.

My friend R(boy's name). (*Mm-hmm.*) I liked him. But he was not a good boyfriend [Laughs]. (*No? Tell me about that.*) He like, like two hours after we were going out he was like trying to kiss me [Laughs]. (*Oh wow.*) Like all over, so I'm like, dude you're too clingy, let's just be friends.... (*And so in moments when he was really trying to kiss you what did it feel like for you?*) I just laughed 'cause there was like a bunch of people around, I'm like [Laughs] running away from him 'cause it was awkward a little bit.... (*So did it make you feel sort of uncomfortable?*) Oh yeah.

Although the word Jessica uses to describe the boyfriend is "clingy", what Jessica describes is a situation of pressure; she was pressured by a boy to engage in an activity she was not ready for, kissing, and she had to flee from the boy to escape the pressure. Jessica reports that when she attempted to resolve the situation by trying to break up with the boy she was met with some resistance.

(How did you, how did you discuss that with him?) Well [Laughs] first I was like well, no, like after two days I tried to break up with him and he argued with me about it. [Both laugh] I was like, “I think we should we break up”. He was like, “Why?” I’m Like, “cause you’re kinda meh”, and he’s like “oh well I can stop” then I’m like alright. And then he didn’t stop it so I just wrote him a note and got my friend to give it to him. [Both laugh]

According to Jessica, her boyfriend did not respond to her request to stop pressuring her even though he agreed to stop. In her present relationship, Jessica reports that she feels comfortable and is not pressured by her partner.

Well, I just like if I’m over at his house and I don’t want to do something, well he’s been pretty good at about it for me like, I’d just be like, “No, I don’t want to do that” and he’d be like, alright (*Hmm, yeah.*) I think I’m pretty lucky in terms of that ‘cause there are guys who like pressure for more.

Interestingly, Jessica associates her boyfriend’s understanding and the lack of pressure with luck, something that is not within her control. The underlying assumption in Jessica’s comment is that a girl does not have a lot of control over the type of boyfriend she has, she can be lucky and have a non-pressuring boyfriend, or she can be unlucky and have a pressuring one. Lauren too associates lack of pressure with luck.

Yeah, he's not like pressuring or anything like that. He's completely... Let's put it that way, so, I don't know, I guess I'm kinda fortunate in that like, any guy that I've had a relationship with has either been a girl [Laughs]... (*[Laughs] What do you mean?*) [Laughs] Like feeling-sy or like “oh, whatever you want to do” and like, “oh my God”, or someone's been my friend, so.

Similarly to what Jessica said, Lauren describes the selection of a particular boyfriend as a passive process; she talks about “guys she had” and not boyfriends she chose or dated. And the fact that the boyfriends she had, including the existing ones, were non-pressuring is not because they were nice guys or because she chose to date boys she knew would treat her well, but because she got lucky. Girls’ perception of the role of luck in their relationships evidences about the perception girls have about the distribution of power in their relationships. Lauren also points out that being friends prior to entering a relationship has been a protective factor for her; boyfriends who were her friends before the initiation of the dating relationship would not pressure her or hurt her in any way.

Some girls discussed how comfortable they were in terms of the levels of their sexual activities with their partners. Melissa stated that she feels comfortable where she and her boyfriend are and that she does not feel pressured in the relationship.

(*Aaron ... Does he want any more?*) Like pressure me? (*Yeah. Yeah.*) No, he doesn't. That's - yeah. (*Good.*) Yeah. (*Yeah. So it's comfortable between the two of you guys?*) Yeah. (*That's really good. That's important. Do you feel like*

if he did pressure you, do you feel comfortable saying “no” or?) Yeah. (Yeah?)

Yeah, I do.

Having a pressure-free relationship is thus helpful for Melissa to feel comfortable in the relationship. Brady states that the inexistence of pressure in her relationship is what makes her relationship with her boyfriend stronger.

I don't know lot of things like ... sexual things aren't really a concern with us- I ... like he, he's really not into those kind of things like. *(Yeah?)* You know how... Not like guys like pressure girls into doing things like that. Oh, he's not like that. *(Good.)* He's a lot different from that. *(That's great.)* And I guess that's how why our relationship is so strong too. *(Mmhhh. For sure.)* Because he doesn't pressure me into things like that.

Brady describes that sexuality for her is a source of concern, not a source of pleasure, possibly due to her exposure to the frequent pressure boys put on girls in that regard. This perception not only alludes to the limited role desire may play in Brady's sexual experiences, but may also explain why for her it is so important not to have sexual pressure within her relationship. Seeing sexuality as a concern may lead Brady to perceive sexual experiences as frightening and make sexual pressure seem very dangerous. Similarly to Brady and Melissa, Kelly too states that she does not experience pressure within her relationship. Kelly, who had sex at fourteen and then did not have sex

for over a year until she started to have sex again describes her boyfriend's behaviour during that time.

He was totally fine with it. He, that's what I love about him, he's so supporting, he's so great and everything. He's not going to pressure me into anything. He doesn't pressure me into anything at all and stuff like that.

However, when Kelly describes her sexual experiences with her partner after the first time they had sex it appears that there was some level of pressure on behalf of her partner.

Well of course, a guy, every several months he'd be like, so..., no, okay, that's fine". And then I'd totally change the subject. And then, yeah, he wasn't pushy at all. He'd just jokingly say something and then I'd look at him like, no, and he's like okay. But yeah, he wouldn't, that's one thing that I absolutely love. He'd never push me into anything. Like he'd always check with me, is that okay or is this okay. It's like yup. And he always asks me are you okay? Yes.

The type of pressure Kelly describes here is more subtle; her boyfriend asks her whether she is ready every few months. However, being repeatedly asked whether she is ready to have sex again and the underlying message that she has to eventually be ready and have sex with her partner, who is ready and waiting, is a pressuring one. In sum, most of the girls described that their present relationships are free of pressure and that

they feel comfortable in the way their sexual relationships are. However, through the descriptions of the sexual relationships of some of the girls, it appears that girls may be pressured more than what they perceive to be.

In both waves of interviews girls discussed pressure within their dating and sexual relationships. The content of what they said, however, varied. In the earlier interviews, girls who talked about sexual pressure talked about experiences of pressure and about the importance of feeling comfortable and ready for sexual experiences. Some girls also expressed their zero-tolerance policy to pressure within relationships. In the later interviews, most of the girls discussed the inexistence of pressure in the relationships they had during the time of the interview, stating how much they value the comfort level they have with their partners. It is interesting to note that some girls viewed the inexistence of pressure as a matter of luck, something outside of girl's control. Also, some girls who stated that they did not experience pressure actually described situations of pressure, which indicates that girls become more tolerant of pressure and do not often identify situations as ones that involve pressure. Overall, more girls discussed sexual pressure in the later interviews, which is expected as girls matured and as more girls reported having sexual experiences.

In the earlier interviews, a few girls also discussed a reversed situation, whereby girls felt ready for a particular activity but did not consider initiating the activity. Most of the girls in such situations did not acknowledge the possibility of initiating; they wanted their partners to initiate the activity even at the cost of their own frustration as they believed that that is the boys' role. Some of the girls who thought about initiating but refrained from doing so, discussed their decision in terms of pressure, choosing to wait

for their partners to initiate as they feared that they would pressure their partners if they did. Girls' experiences with agency and pressure exemplify the complex interaction between gender roles, girls' sexual feelings, boys' sexual feelings, and social messages about acceptable behaviours for each gender.

3.2.3.2 - Negotiating sexuality in the context of sexual labelling

Many girls reflected on the impact of labelling on their own sexual experiences and on their sexuality-related decisions. Girls talked about how they negotiate the risk and how they make decisions in spite of the potential social consequences they face. Brady tries to ignore the label while choosing to engage in some sexual activities.

(Like, if you're being called a whore or slut, how does that make you feel about your body?) Well, I try to ignore it. Like 'cause like I know that I am not a whore and I am not a slut. Like I try to save that stuff till like I'm like a lot older. So, like right now for me I just ignore it; like I try not to use that against my friends and all that.

Jessica also reports that although she tries to act based on her desire and based on what she wants and is ready for, she still thinks of the risks of labelling when she makes sexuality-related decisions.

Well, I don't know, like I'm not going to go around and I'm not going to sleep with 5 guys, but I have a boyfriend and we haven't done anything yet but if I were

going to, I just wouldn't tell a lot of people I think that would remain between me and him so that I like, I know if I went and I was like if everyone knew they'd be like alright you're a whore... like it doesn't necessarily make you a whore, but you'd be called a whore

For Jessica, keeping sexual experiences in secret from her peers is the only way to avoid being labelled. Given that usually boys are the ones to disclose sexual experiences which lead to labelling, secrecy requires substantial trust between the partners, making a monogamous relationship the safest place for girls' sexual experiences. Jessica also explains that although she is going to do what she and her boyfriend want, it is important to be aware of the consequences.

So like, yeah I just, like if I'm going to do something it's going to be between us... and just not what anyone else wants but you just have to keep that in mind. (*Yeah.*) That there could be consequences like, it could get out and people might think you're a whore...

Jessica adds,

Well yeah, there's like stuff with your boyfriend it's like oh well people are going to think I'm a whore and stuff. But I don't know, you can't please everyone. (*No, very true.*) You like have to do what you want...

Jessica's conclusion of her attitude towards labels is that "it's not something [she] want[s] to worry about...but it's kinda something you do have to." Jessica manages to reconcile the danger of labelling with her own desire by acknowledging the danger and the potential consequences, choosing to listen to her own body, and taking precautions, such as secrecy, to minimize the risk of labelling. However, when asked about whether she believes that at some point in the future labelling will no longer be an issue, Jessica displays quite a pessimistic view.

(Is there a certain age where you get to where having sex isn't considered slutty anymore?) I don't know. *(Hmm.)* It could be like, I don't know, people are always going to call you a whore like... it's just going to come from everywhere so... *(Wow.)* Maybe once you're, well, once you're married you can't like, I guess, but obviously people are going to do it before that. *(Yeah, yeah.)* It's hard to say.

Not being able to see a future free of labelling prior to marriage may explain Jessica's acknowledgement that she ought to take a risk if she wants to have sex. Lauren reports that thoughts about the potential risks of labelling are present in her interaction with boys and affect the decisions she makes about what would be safe to do and what wouldn't.

Yeah. I mean it's always in the back of your head like if you like, I kissed a guy at New Year's and I wasn't dating him. And it's like, am I going to go back to school and then everyone's going to be like, oh well, blah-blah-blah, and Lauren

was making out with this guy and nah-nah-nah and like. Do you worry about that?

I don't know. Like you do more than I think than he worried about it, I mean he was kinda like hey, this is whatever. I don't know. He didn't really care about it, but um, like it's something you think about. ... I think everyone just kind of, everybody does, did that so no one cares but you, you worry about that. Like if you do something is it considered righteous or perfect. ...

Part of Lauren's decision whether to kiss a boy is risk calculation. She is aware that kissing a boy without being in a relationship with him would lead to peer's discussion of her behaviour. But given that everyone is kissing, she is not likely to be labelled, which makes kissing acceptable in that situation and in that time. With all these risk calculations, how much space is left for sexual feelings?

As discussed elsewhere, Melissa reports being labelled 'tight' by her peers. She claims that labelling does not affect her sexual decision making.

(And do .. does that affect how you feel about what you want to do sexually like?)

No, [Laughing]. *(No?)* I, yeah I guess, I just don't care really what people say

However, elsewhere in the interview, Melissa explains that she is not only concerned with being labelled as a result of sexual activities she is also concerned about the consequences of labelling.

(So tell me about that. Does that come into your head?) Yeah. (*Yeah? What kinds of things come into your head?*) I guess I don't know and then people just talking too. (*Mmmhmm.*) Like unless you really trust the person then like you don't want like people to, I guess that comes like into that slut thing too. (*Right.*) Like you don't want people just thinking: "oh, well, she did that with that guy, then obviously she'll do it with me too," or like.... So, stuff like that I guess where I don't know.

Thus, although Melissa does not think she is influenced by labelling and does not care what other people think she does report altering her behaviour in order to avoid labelling. She also states that the risk of being labelled a 'slut' is the main reason why she would not have sex and that if she chose to become sexually active she would label her current relationship as an officially dating relationship first.

Like I think if I did, like, want to do that, like, I'd give us the label of, like, "boyfriend"/"girlfriend" ... (*Ah! Right.*) ... and, like, actually, like.... Like be with him for like a long time.

For many girls in the study the danger of being labelled a 'slut' or a 'whore' is a real threat which has an immediate impact on their sexual decision making. While girls vary in the level of their awareness on how much their behaviour is impacted by the label they all stated that the risk is always in the back of their minds. It seems that external factors, such as social pressures and labels, leave girls little space to connect to their own

bodies and listen to their desire, which may even be perceived as dangerous as it may move girls closer to the risk. Although in the previous wave of interviews girls talked quite elaborately about sexual labelling in their social contexts, girls did not explicitly relate their own experiences to the risk of labelling. As discussed previously, the way labels are used changed over times, with girls describing more intricate systems of rules with more girls reporting being personally affected by sexual labelling. It is possible that with the evolution of social rules, as girls matured and engaged in more dating and sexual relationships, labelling became more pertinent to their lives and the risk of labelling became more immediate. In the later interviews, the fact that many girls discussed that sexual labelling affects their sexual decision making evidences that over time sexual labelling is a real concern for girls across relationships and social settings.

3.2.3.3 - Communicating about sexuality with partner

Many girls talked about how they communicate with their partners about sexuality. Two types of conversations appeared from girls' stories, negotiating comfort levels with the types of sexual behaviours they engage in and giving feedback to partner in the course of sexual behaviours.

3.2.3.3.1 - Negotiating comfort levels

Jenna states that although she does not talk with her boyfriend much about sexuality she does discuss with him the comfort level of their sexual behaviours.

(And do you and your boyfriend do you talk much about stuff like that? Like about sex or anything like that?) I don't know, not often no. (No? Um, like how do you know when you're with him what you're comfortable doing and what you're not comfortable doing?) I guess we talk about it.

Jessica states that her boyfriend often initiates conversations about sexuality in order to make sure that Jessica is comfortable in the relationship. She also states that she and her boyfriend often discuss the possibility of becoming sexually active.

Well, yeah me and him we have a pretty good relationship. We talk about stuff. And like we've talked about like if we were going to do it like he's made it very clear that he does not want me pressured like at all. Like that is like his main thing [Laughing]. *(That's great.)* So, yeah, he's worried about not making, like making me feel comfortable and himself too like... he doesn't want like the consequences if something were to happen.

Kyra, who is sexually active, describes the way she and her boyfriend reached the decision to start having sex.

(And what was that like for you when you made, did you make that decision, did it just happen?) We made it. (And what was it, how did you know you were ready?) I was totally myself around him. And I just, I don't know. I just – [Boyfriend: It

was just different with each other.] I just, I could I felt comfortable with anything around him. I was comfortable at any time.

For Kyra, being comfortable with her boyfriend and having an open communication about sexual experiences was crucial for her decision to become sexually active. Further, the decision to start having sex was a decision she and her boyfriend made after openly discussing their relationship and their comfort levels.

3.2.3.3.2 - Giving feedback about sexual experience

A few girls talked about the importance of giving feedback to sexual partners about what they do and don't like. Sarah states that having an open communication about sexual preferences makes sexual experiences easier.

(And I wonder about communication between boys and girls as well around that. Like, who do you think it's better at telling their partner what they want or what they like? Is it easier for boys or easier for girls?) Oh, both cause like I, I don't know... (Nice.) Then it's easier for either/or [boys and girls]. Well, that's what I find. (That's nice. So in the relationships that you've had as you've gotten older, it's...you're able to talk about what you like.) Yeah. For sure.

Kyra points out that being comfortable with her partner is what empowers her to give her partner sexual feedback.

(How, how do you have the confidence or how do you feel safe enough to be able to say what you like or don't like or say like when to stop and when it's okay.

Like how? What, what do you need as a base to have that kind of communication?) [Boyfriend: Like, with each other?] Be comfortable.

[Boyfriend: Yeah, if you -] You have to be comfortable. [Boyfriend: If you can't do that then you shouldn't -] You can't. Then you can't ... you can't even have a relationship if you can't do that. [Boyfriend: No. It's just wasting time.] Yeah.

For Kyra and her boyfriend, comfort and open communication are not only key to sexual experiences but to a good relationship in general.

3.2.3.3.3 - Better things to talk about...

Sarah was the only girl to state that although she feels comfortable with her current partner, she feels that conversations about sexuality are far less dominant than in her previous relationships.

But now like I, I'm...basically I'm somewhat seeing this guy. Like he is amazing. He's another R(boy's name). And he, he, he's so sweet and I know that like that's not any priority to him and like we...we're...yeah, we are a lot alike. It's scary but like... (*Okay.*)... (*That's not a priority to him, what do...what do you mean?*) Well, most guys would talk about it more than anything and him it's like not...it's like it's nothing we'd ever...I could never really see us ever really discuss...like

we're close. Like we talk about...we have better things to really talk about right now type thing.

Although from Sarah's description it is not clear how much she and her partner talk about sexuality and how open they are with each other about their comfort level and their sexual preferences, it is interesting to note that there can be too much focus on sexuality and that establishing a balance is important. When talking about what kinds of things girls talk about with their partners in relation to sexuality, girls discussed how they negotiate with their partners their comfort levels with regards to sexual experiences as well as the importance of giving feedback to partners about likes and dislikes of sexual activities. In addition, Sarah mentioned that in her present relationship sexuality-related conversations play a less dominant role than in her past relationships. Overall, communication about sexuality with partners is a theme that was introduced by girls in the third wave of interviews; it was not central in girls' earlier interviews. The nearest theme in earlier interviews to the discussion of sexuality is girls' accounts of their negotiation of sexual pressure from their partners (e.g., Lauren's experience with kissing and Sarah's first experience with sex). However, in their negotiation of pressure in earlier relationships, girls did not report having open conversations about comfort levels. Overall, given that most girls reported having few sexual experiences in the earlier interviews, the pervasiveness of pressure from boys, as well as girls' young age, these findings are quite understandable. As girls matured, became more experienced with sexuality, and either experienced or witnessed pressure, they became more comfortable

discussing sexuality with their partners and became to realize the importance of communication to the strength of their relationships, as discussed by some of the girls.

3.2.3.4 - The body in the relationship

Many girls referred to how their various relationships affect on how they feel about their bodies and talked about what their bodies feel like within the relationship.

3.2.3.4.1 - Body as guide to sexuality

Jenna talks about how she knows within herself that she is ready for some experiences and not ready for others.

(And so how do you know what's in yourself like, okay this is as far as I want to go? How do you know?) I don't know, I guess you just know [Laughs].

([Laughs] Where do you feel it? Like do you feel it in your head like your mind is racing or do you, does your body say no what happens?) Both I guess.

For Jenna, the cues to her comfort levels lay both, within her mind and within her body. Given the frequent risk assessment done by girls in regards to sexualized labelling, the importance of the mind is of no surprise. Sarah discusses how her sexual feelings navigate her sexual experiences; she distinguishes between times when she is and is not interested in sex.

(And this might be kind of weird question but if, if a girl was feeling comfortable with a guy and feeling sexual desire, if her body could speak what would her body say?) Mmm. I don't know. 'That's good'. Um I don't know. That's ah kind of weird. Yeah, I don't know. I don't know at all. Um... *(Is it possible to describe how her body would be feeling, rather than what it would say?)* Mmm. I think she'd probably just like, 'Get on me now'. *(And what about if a girl was with a guy and he wanted to have sex but she didn't, what do you think her body would say?)* 'Get off me now'. *(Okay.)* I don't know. ...That's how I'd say it. Like I'd be like, yeah, 'Get off me'.

By identifying with the hypothetical girl and saying what she would have said if she herself was feeling interested and disinterested in sexual activities, Sarah displays how her body guides her sexual experiences. Sarah's comments also display Sarah's connection with her body and her ability to connect with her sexual desire.

3.2.3.4.2 - Positive feelings about the body within a relationship

Some girls talked about feeling better about their bodies when being within dating relationships, primarily relating that being found attractive by their partners helps them feel good about themselves. Lauren reveals that having a partner helped her accept her chest size and be satisfied with her body.

My mom's always told me like, "Yeah, you're really athletic". Like, "The first thing that go... goes down is your chest". Like, "You have nothing there". But

now like I guess before it was kinda like, oh my goodness, 'cause I have friends that are well, beating me there [Laughs] and I'm like, oh my God. What is wrong with me? But, I just, I guess I don't care as much anymore because I know that there are, I guess, again, with the whole dating thing, once you have guys that like you, you kind of feel more like you are acceptable. (*Sure, yeah.*) And like there is someone that likes you, you know, I'm like, you know, have no chest, and whatever else. I don't know. So you're kinda like, well someone's willing to accept me or like me and, hey if you like them back, then it works, and then you're comfortable and then you're done.

Having an external validation from boys who found Laurent attractive helped her accept her small chest size. Kyra reports that being sexually active has influenced her feelings about her body.

(Did it [having had sex] change how you felt about you felt about yourself afterwards?) Like I don't know, I just, I think he gave me more confidence. [Boyfriend: Yeah, she definitely gave me more confidence.] Yeah? [Boyfriend: Yeah.] (*Oh. Tell me more about that? Where does the confidence come from?*) I don't know. He just loves my body the way it was. And just it wouldn't change for anything.

Jessica too states that knowing that someone finds her attractive helps her think that way about her self.

Well, I don't know, I've, I think I've, I don't know, I feel kinda hot I guess
'cause... (*Yeah?*) ...knowing that someone like finds you all, like someone else
finds you attractive... (*Sure.*) ...it makes you feel attractive. I think I have an
alright, alright body like...

Unlike some girls, like Lauren, Kyra, and Jessica, who directly acknowledge the
positive effect on their relationships on their bodies, Brady is less clear about this. While
she says that being in a relationship has not affected the way she feels about her body she
also explains how it made her feel better.

(Did you feel any differently about your body once you got into this relationship?)

No, it actually didn't. He always tells me how perfect I am and how pretty I am
and so it encourages me to. (*Good.*) And like he always tells me like how
beautiful I am and so it helps me out a lot too.

For some girls, either the mere existence of a dating relationship or the explicit
compliments and actions of their partners help girls feel good about their bodies.

3.2.3.4.3 - Negative feeling about the body within a relationship

For some girls, having a partner is a source of nervousness, insecurity and
discomfort. Jessica too talks about her bodily sensations in her current relationship. She

notes, for example, that she feels unusually nervous around the boy she is currently dating.

But like I've never really been nervous around guys except for like my boyfriend now I don't know why but he made me really nervous [Laughs]. (*Really?*) Yeah, but I've never been like shy around guys and stuff.

Jessica explains the difference by noting that she has different feelings for this particular boy.

(*What do you think was different about this boyfriend?*) I don't know [Laughs] I really liked him [Laughs].

Although Jessica reports that she is no longer nervous around her boyfriend and she also notes that there are times when she feels quite uncomfortable, such as when she and her boyfriend go out.

(*When um, when do you feel the most uncomfortable in your body?*) Like before, when I'm getting ready for something. (*Mm-hmm.*) Like if I'm, if it's like before I'm going to my boyfriend's house or going to a movie I'm like well, he's not going to think I'm pretty... I'm, I'm uh, like I'm just nervous.

Sarah too talks about some of her relationships as a source of discomfort. She notes that most of her past partners were very slim and describes how that affected her feelings about her own body.

It's, it's okay but it's just...I can't quite explain it. It's just...it's not uncomfortable but I...there's, there's a word to explain it and I can't find it. It's not uncomfortable but it's not bad but it's not great, you know what I mean? (*Okay.*) Like it's...I don't know. I just don't think much of it.

Although Jessica does not state that her boyfriends' slim figures have a prominent negative impact on her feelings about her own body, she does raise that it has some negative impact.

3.2.3.4.4 - *Same as always...*

Some girls stated that their relationships with their partner did not affect the way they feel about their bodies. Jenna states that having a boyfriend does not impact how she feels about her own body.

(*Um, and how do you feel about your body when your with him?*) Good, same as always. (*Same as always? Does it make you feel more worried about your body or more confident about your body?*) Neither, just the same [Laughs]. (*Just the same?*) Yeah. (*Um, did it make you feel, um, like did you ... ever feel embarrassed about your body or nervous about your body?*) No.

Kelly, who has been with her boyfriend for years, states that having become sexually active did not affect how she feels towards her body within the relationship. She states that there are always times when she feels more comfortable and times when she feels less comfortable when she is with her boyfriend. When asked whether having had sex changed how she felt Kelly said,

Not really, like there are times when I want to be all covered up and everything. I don't want him to really see me. And there are other times when I really don't care.

Kelly states that although after becoming sexually active she felt slightly more comfortable with her boyfriend, she still continued to have times when she wanted to be covered up.

Like I must say I was more comfortable with my boyfriend seeing me but then, even now, I have my times when I want to be covered up, don't look at me, look the other way or something like that. And then there's times where I don't care.

Girls appeared to be influenced in different ways by their relationships; while most of the girls discussed positive effects, some girls mentioned that their relationships made them more uncomfortable or had no effect at all.

Two themes from the earlier interviews are related to the girls' discussion of their bodies within their relationships, namely, 'The body in relationships' and 'The missing discourse of desire as motivator'. Girls' narratives in the later interviews are significantly more elaborate about the experiences of their bodies in their relationship than in earlier interviews, which can be expected as girls also reported having more sexual experiences and dating relationships. This could also be due to girls' greater awareness of their bodies across different situations. For instance, as time passed by, more girls reported that having partners improved their feelings towards their bodies. In the earlier interviews, when girls discussed their motivations for dating relationships and sexual experiences girls' narratives often did not include sexual feelings as a factor. This theme did not reappear in later interviews.

3.2.3.5 - Pregnancy and STIs

Two girls in the study mentioned that the risk of pregnancy and STIs affects their sexual decision making. When Melissa talks about things that she takes into consideration when deciding whether she would like to become sexually active or not, in addition to the risk of sexual labelling as discussed previously, Melissa also mentions the risks of pregnancy and STIs.

(So tell me about that. Does that come into your head?) Yeah. (Yeah? What kinds of things come into your head?) Well, like I'd never want to get pregnant [Chuckle]. Or like just like, well like there's diseases you can get or just, like...

Melissa perceives the danger of unwanted pregnancy or diseases as real and relevant. Although she does not state that her main reason for abstinence is her fear of pregnancy and STIs, she does report being seriously concerned by these factors. Brady reports being more affected by these factors, specifically by the risk of becoming a teenage mother. When she is asked about sexual experiences she says that she is “not into all that stuff” and is further queried about the subject.

(So when you say, um, are you able to describe a little bit what you mean like that I'm not into all that stuff. I mean I say that stuff, what do you mean by that? Like what are you comfortable doing now but?) Well, I don't know like I'll kiss him and make out with him and that kind of stuff but like things beyond that, I'm just scared of becoming a mother. *(Right. [Laughing])* Pretty much. And so I don't want to be caught with that cause I got really bad luck. *(Yeah?)* So with my luck, trying any of that stuff, I'll be the first one being a mother. And I'm definitely not ready to be a mother. *(Right so getting pregnant is a huge ...)* A big issue with me. *(Uh, um, , No that's, that's good.)* And like he knows. Like I've explained that to him so he knows not to try anything with me.

Brady reports being so scared by the prospect of becoming a mother that she is ready to refrain from sexual activities altogether. Interestingly, Brady relates becoming pregnant with having a bad luck, denying the possibility that she has control over her pregnancy (by using birth control), which may explain her high levels of fear. If sexual experiences are seen as necessarily resulting in both, pregnancy and labelling (as Brady

stated elsewhere), there is little space for the connection with sexual feelings, which may seem as a source of danger or threat. Further, given that pregnancy is usually within girls' control, the anxiety some girls expressed over sexuality in relation to the potential threat of pregnancy point to the lack of information about sexuality, which unnecessarily associates sexuality with physical risks. Similar to girls' discussion of pregnancy within their social contexts, the discussion of the role risk of pregnancy plays in girls' sexual decision making is limited to the later interview. Again, I suspect that girls' age and level of sexual experiences accounts for this finding.

3.2.3.6 - Choosing not to have a boyfriend

A few of the girls report choosing to remain single and not to engage in relationships that require commitment. In discussing her rationale for choosing to remain single, Sarah portrays a complex decision making process which involves a number of factors, including her stopping to use the birth-control pill and her realization that she would rather invest her time in friends and family.

Yeah, so in the last two months I haven't even thought about...well, other than like...other than R(boy's name), but like that was kind of like...I was like that's it. I'm not going looking for any guys. That's that. Like I put my foot down. I was like, no. I'm sick of them all. (*Okay.*) But then he kind of came to me so I was like, oh, okay. (*What was the experience that got you just, forget it for a while, I'm sick of them all?*) Maybe just...we...well, eh, I was off birth control and that have some...I'm not sure. (*Okay.*) But like I just...I had better things to do with

my time than sit around and think about guys and stuff. Like I'd rather think about friends and stuff, you know, and my family and stuff.

According to Sarah, initiating relationships with boys requires work on her behalf, which she calls "looking for guys". Sarah decided that she is no longer interested in investing energy in boys and prefers to invest her time in her friends and family. Interestingly, when a boy came to her and initiated contact, she agreed to establish contact with the boy. Sarah reports that the relationship she established with R(boy's name) is a friendship with some sexual experiences. It is not clear whether Sarah was motivated by her desire in agreeing to the relationship or not. What is important to observe in Sarah's comment is that her rules about relationships are complex and fluid, depending on her priorities, on whether she takes birth-control pills, and on the availability of interested partners. Melissa, who also reports seeing a boy but who refuses to date him, feels that a relationship is too demanding for her.

I'm not really... I don't really like that sort of stuff like it creates so much like it makes me have to worry about like another person and I'm so selfish right now. [Laughing] Like I just don't want to you know like be worried about it. (*That's okay.*) In the winter I'm super busy like I have like two sports at least every night and then they like some people just don't understand that, they'd be like, "Oh, well I want to hang out" and it's like "Well, I'm sorry, I'm busy" and then like finally when I do have time to myself, I just want to be able to do whatever I want and not have to worry about "Oh, I have to spend time with this person because

you know, we're going out", so I'm selfish that way.[Laughing] But like.... (*I don't know if I'd call it selfish or just...*) And then it just creates so much- Like some people ... it just creates problems too- You know?

Melissa reports being very attuned to her overall interests in friends and activities; she recognizes that a dating relationship may restrict her freedom to allocate her time in the way she wants and that it may involve problems and she chooses to resist the social pressure and avoid the label. Melissa further explains the impact of having a label as well as what differentiates her relationship from an official dating relationship.

(*So what is the difference like when you say you're seeing somebody....*) Yeah, that's like my plan. There's not really a difference right now, 'cause I wouldn't go and like be with some other guy. And like I still hang out with him and talk to him all the time, so there's not really different, it's just like that label sort of that makes it official, like yeah, that's like I'm someone's girlfriend, like I just...I don't want to label it ... I don't know why? [Laughing] I so.... (*I think that's cool! [Laughing]*) I'm so sick of labels that....

Melissa appears not only concerned by the commitment aspect of a dating relationship but also by its effect on the definition of herself as an individual. She does not want to be someone's girlfriend, she wants to be defined and known by who she is as a free individual. In light of all the previously discussed social pressures, girls' decision

to remain officially single while having some sexual relationships appears courageous and unique.

In the earlier interviews, the decision to remain single was also echoed; Kyra and Melissa reported in their earlier interviews that they preferred not to have boyfriends, after having experiences with dating relationships. The rational voiced by Kyra for being single resembles that of Melissa and Sarah in later interviews, namely, that the girls view a dating relationship as something that requires more time and effort than they are interested to invest. Thus, the cost-benefit analysis of a dating relationship remains something that some girls engage in. It is also interesting to note the process which Melissa underwent over time; in the earlier interview, she reported not wanting a boyfriend without being able or willing to articulate her rational for her decision. In her later interview, although she noted that she was “seeing” a boy, she was disinterested in an official dating relationship with him. Based on her own experiences with dating relationships and her observations of the relationships of her peers’ Melissa decided that a dating relationship would demand more time and commitment than she was willing to invest. While Melissa acknowledges the risk of labelling girls face if they engage in sexual activities without being in long-term relationships, and the social pressure in her peer-group to engage in dating relationships, Melissa is able to resist the pressures and take the risk in order to remain true to what she wants. Possibly, her supportive and accepting family is one of the factors that inspires confidence in Melissa and strengthens her, allowing her to make the decisions she does. In sum, girls’ decisions to remain single and their decisions to have relationships with boys without assigning the “boyfriend/girlfriend” title to them displays strength on behalf of these girls, as they resist

the various pressures they face and undertake risks in order to behave in accordance with their interests and sexual feelings.

3.2.3.7 - Summary of sexuality in the context of relationships with partners

In the later interviews, girls' discussion of their sexuality in the context of their various relationships with different partners became more elaborate. In the earlier interviews, girls focused more on the initiation process of their relationships, which was central for some girls as they started dating around the time of the earlier interviews. This theme was not central to girls' discussion in their later interviews. Consistently with the earlier interviews, in the third wave of interviews girls discussed the role sexual pressure plays in their relationships and the interaction of their relationships with their feelings in and about their bodies. Also, in both waves of interviews some girls reported choosing to not engage in official dating relationships, with some girls discussing their motives for their decisions. A number of themes were introduced by girls in later interviews, including the effect of sexual labelling and of pregnancies and STIs on their sexual decision-making, as well as girls' communication with their partners about sexuality. The breadth of girls' experiences with sexualities naturally increased with time, which was reflected by girls' stories.

CHAPTER IV

Discussion

The present study sought to investigate the evolution of adolescent girls' experiences with sexuality over time as well as the interrelationship between girls'

experiences and their broader socio-cultural contexts. Of interest was the influence of social messages about girls' sexuality on girls' experiences with sexuality and on their connection with their own sexual feelings. Through a qualitative analysis of narratives shared by nine girls at two points in time in their adolescence the emerging themes indicated that three main factors in girls' contexts played the most determinant role in shaping girls' experiences; these are girls' peers and friends, families, and partners. Girls' narratives also revealed a tight relationship between these factors, reporting that messages from and experiences with their peers and families often had a direct influence on their experiences with their partners and vice versa.

Girls' narratives revealed that as they matured, girls' social contexts became more complex and ambiguous and many of the messages they receive from their peers, families and partners became ridden with contradictions. Such reality not only creates a challenge for girls' ability to connect with and act in accordance with their sexual feelings but also poses a risk on girls' physical and mental wellbeing. The increase in the complexity of girls' social contexts can be seen through a number of factors that changed in girls' narratives over time. Firstly, girls' narratives in later interviews became more elaborate, displayed a greater number of themes, and revealed the development of intricate social systems and social messages. Secondly, girls' narratives indicated that as girls matured they also gained greater insight into their socio-cultural contexts and into the power dynamics within them; thus, girls' subjective perceptions of their socio-cultural contexts acknowledged the complexities and the contradictions and impacted on girls' experiences by making their sexual decision-making process more complex and their sexual feelings more confusing.

In this chapter, I will discuss some developmental processes that occur in adolescence and which are related to the development of sexual and dating relationships. I will proceed to discuss how the evolution of themes from girls' narratives exhibits increasing social and interpersonal complexity in relation to each of the three aspects of their social context (peers/friends, family, and partner), linking findings from the present study to previous research. I will conclude by examining the protective factors for girls' resilience that emerged from the present study and discuss the studies limitations and its implications for future research.

4.1 - Change over time: Putting narratives in a developmental perspective

The present study followed girls' sexual experiences over two years of their adolescent years. As previously mentioned, over time girls' narratives not only displayed greater insight but also revealed changes in familial and peer relationships. It is important to nest the discussion of how girls' narratives changed over time in a developmental perspective as developmental factors such as individuation and autonomy can elucidate on some of the changes evident in girls' narratives. The emergence of romantic and sexual relationships in adolescence is virtually universal in western societies. Endocrinal changes of puberty and sexual desire provide only a partial explanation; hormones may produce sexual desire and lust but they do not explain dating relationships before puberty and they provide an inadequate explanation to adolescents' interest in dating relationships and love (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Therefore, biological maturation ought to be considered within the context of developmental maturation.

Relatedness and autonomy are interpersonal processes that are central to psychological development in adolescence (Allan, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994). Relatedness is a "self-in-relation-to-other" construct and refers to an individual's ability to experience closeness and intimacy with others (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). Autonomy, on the other hand, is the capacity for independent thought, feeling and action (Allen et al, 1994) and is defined in terms of independence from parental influence, self-dependence, and self-reliance. It is a "self-as-separate-from-others" construct and is linked to exploration and individuation (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999).

Gray and Steinberg (1999) argue that emergence of romantic and sexual relationships goes hand-in-hand with the growth of autonomy in the parent-child relationship. As adolescents change their view of their parents and of their own relationship with them, they are increasingly likely to seek emotional support and companionship outside of the family. Further, the re-awakening of sexual energy in adolescence contributes to the emergence of the sexual component in adolescents' relationships, and adolescents establish sexual relationships in addition to platonic friendships (Freud, 1958).

Separation from parents and increase in time spent with peers also ensues in increased peer pressure to conform to peer standards, including those regulating sexual and dating relationships (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). For instance, dating in early adolescence is a function of peer group standards and even less physically mature adolescents may engage in dating relationships (Dornubusch et al., 1981). Older adolescents, after gaining self-confidence from their non-familial relationships, are likely to engage in exploration of their groups' dynamics and become critical of and report

dissatisfaction with their peer groups, believing that their peer groups restrict their autonomy (Brown et al., 1986). Consequently, susceptibility to peer pressure is reportedly higher in early adolescence and decreases in later adolescence (Brown et al., 1986).

Some of these processes are evident in the present study through the change in girls' narratives over time. Firstly, as will be discussed in more details in the upcoming sections, girls' discussion of their families in the context of their sexual and dating experiences reflects decreased parental control and a process of separation and distancing. Further, the process of individuation and autonomy is reflected in girls' increased insight into their social contexts and into the power dynamics between genders; they display development of independent thought and critical approach of their relationships and of their peer groups and norms.

4.2 - Peers / Friends

In girls' peer networks, sexualized labelling such as 'slut', 'whore', and 'tight' became more prominent over time and more girls in the study reported being affected by labelling. More actions on behalf of girls became a source of judgement and labelling. Further, as time passed sexualized labelling became less associated with girls' direct behaviours and was used randomly in conversations between girls and in girls' fights as a subject of rumours and lies girls spread about each other. Thus, with time, sexual labelling became less subjected to girls' control. Although in both waves of interviews girls noted the double standard around the judgement of boys' and girls' behaviour, in later interviews some girls displayed insight into the role of social power in labelling;

some girls acknowledged that boys possessed certain power that enabled them to escape the harsh social judgement faced by girls. Labels also became more permanent as time went by and more girls discussed the irreversibility of labelling in greater detail and displayed an insight about the usefulness of labels, which consequently makes labels hard to change. Thus, as girls matured and with the insight they acquired, they faced a reality that was more disempowering; acquiring a label became easier while avoiding it became rather impossible. Nevertheless, in earlier wave and, more so, in later wave, many girls tried to control their own labelling by engaging or not engaging in specific behaviours.

As some of the girls reported, their relationships with their friends became complicated and unstable, as friendships too become a source of danger over time. In girls' discussion of their fights with friends and peers, sexuality and labelling became an increasingly common subject of girls' quarrels. While in earlier interviews a few girls stated that some people in their peer groups spread false rumours about their sexual experiences, in later interviews, not only more girls related being personally affected by rumours but the originators of rumours became close friends who sought revenge. Also, in later interviews girls reported that close friends became a source of competition for boys and a source of threat to girls' dating relationships. Brady, for instance, chose to keep her boyfriend in secret from her friends after being victimized by them in the past. This, however, did not prevent her friends from continuing to attempt to sabotage her relationship. Some girls also indicated that girl-fights became increasingly aggressive, with girls occasionally engaging in physical fights, which poses a physical risk on girls' wellbeing. Thus, over time, for some girls, relationships with peers and friends became filled with rules and risk-calculations; girls not only needed to monitor their relationships

with wider peer groups but also with close friends. Girls who did not trust their close friends needed to continuously evaluate what is safe to discuss with friends and what can lead to a quarrel, leaving them with a weak support system.

The role of pressure for sexual experiences in girls' social environments also appeared to become more intricate over time, as seen through girls' greater elaboration on the subject in later interviews. In earlier interviews fewer girls talked about pressure; those who did, talked about general pressure as part of pressure to fit in their social groups and about how it is a motivator for girls' sexual experiences. In later interviews, girls' narratives about pressure for sexual experiences revealed the existence of more pressure routes between girls and boys. Boys pressured individual girls within relationships, groups of girls in public spaces, and other boys. Girls pressured other girls to fit in and boys, to live up to social standards. Given that sexuality is closely related to social status and power, as will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter, it is not surprising that girls' narratives revealed that pressure was effective at motivating girls' sexual activities. Although in later interviews displayed greater insight into how exactly the pressure ensues in sexual experiences (e.g., girls being afraid to say "no") the insignificance of sexual feelings to sexual experiences did not appear odd and sexual desire was not mentioned as a factor in the sexual experiences that were discussed in the context of pressure. The increasing complexity in the pressure systems for sexual experiences is further intensified by the contradiction between the naturally expected increase in sexual interest and the increasingly threatening stories about sexual activities. And girls who linked the power differentials with sexually active boys' popularity and sexual pressure faced a particularly disempowering and discouraging reality.

Although girls' narratives on pressure for long-term monogamous relationships remained rather similar, their impact on some of the girls in the study became more substantial, particularly on girls who chose to resist the pressure. As they recognized that sexual experiences outside of a relationship are doomed for social judgement and in the context of peer's continuous pressure to officialise their relationships, resisting girls faced complicated decisions at each step of their unofficial relationships. Overall, as sexuality became more central to girls' experiences with time, pressure for the establishment of commitment-based relationships increased, dictating girls the contexts in which the exploration of sexual feelings may be acceptable. The pressure may be too high even the resisting girls, as most of them noted that if they were to have sex with their partners they would "put a title" on the relationship.

Girls' insight into the complexity of their social contexts is further evidenced in their discussion of the relationship between social power and relationship status, the stereotype that displays girls as asexual, and the acknowledgement of the very real consequences of sexual activities, such as pregnancies and STIs. These three themes that emerged in later interviews all entail a degree of threat on girls' sexuality, physically, by potentially resulting in pregnancies or diseases, socially, by acknowledging that the route to social power depends on one's relationship status and sexual experiences, or emotionally by acknowledging that feeling sexual desire is contradictory to social messages about its appropriateness.

Taken all together, the narratives girls shared in later interviews displayed a complicated system of contradictory messages about girls' sexuality and of threats on girls' sexual feelings, a system in which sexual feelings are seen as irrelevant and

dangerous. Decision-making about one's sexuality is as much personal as it is political, necessitating an assessment of potential risks and benefits. As one tries to disentangle the grid of contradictory messages and harsh social rules, and given the often unstable relationships girls have with their close friends, such decisions become evermore confusing.

Much of what girls described about their peers and friends in relation to sexuality has been discussed in previous research. With regards to sexual labelling, although sexual labelling has been the subject of some previous scholarly work (e.g., Lees, 1993; Wyatt, 1994; Tannenbaum, 1999, Tolman, 2002), past research has focused on older girls and on women. The findings of the present study indicate that sexual labelling not only emerges in a much younger age but that its role in girls' social lives becomes more salient with time. In much of the previous research the consequences of acquiring a negative reputation, such as becoming disinteresting to boys (Raymond, 1994), have been mentioned. Although narratives in the present study echo some of the findings of previous research, they also suggest that some girls may also face increased sexual pressure from their peers once they are labelled, which has not been previously discussed. This consequence is particularly important as it threatens the physical safety of labelled girls.

The social rules around sexuality in girls' social microcosms reflect their greater social culture. The differential judgment of boys' and girls' sexual behaviours by their peers, as emerged in the present study, relates to how Tolman and Higgins described media's evaluation of boys and girls (1996). When discussing media reporting about girls' sexuality, the authors reported girls' behaviour to be labelled as "frustrating" and

“shocking” for holding late-night telephone conversations with boys. When reporting on media coverage of boys, the authors reported boys’ sexuality to be portrayed as “relentless”, “demanding attention”, and as being “something that boys and men cannot control”, a phenomenon Wendy Hollway called “discourse of male sexual drive” (1984). This dichotomy appears to have translated into most of the social environments of the girls in this study as seen through the differential judgement of girls and boys, as well as through girls’ comments indicating that they hold labelled girls responsible for their labelling. And the present study’s findings about the use of labels in adolescent peer groups is not unique to the present study as girls and women consistently bring labelling up in research (e.g., Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Thompson, 1994; Tolman, 2002).

Research on girl-fights demonstrates that in recent decades girl-fights have become more prevalent and aggressive, with girls retreating to what traditionally was classified ‘masculine’ weapons (Thompson, 1994). Some of the girls in the present study did communicate narratives that connect with this trend, as they reported the increasing prevalence of physical fights between girls. Rumour spreading in fights is associated with social status and control; jealousy and competition over social power are two very common motives for girls’ relational aggression (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005). The themes in girls’ narratives also connect with Lyn Mikel Brown’s writing on ‘mean’ girls (2005), who claims that girls aggression toward each other in the form of ‘backstabbing’ and ‘slut-bashing’ originates from girls’ anger with the patriarchal disempowering and confusing social contexts. Girl-fights are girls’ cries for voice, power, and safety, she says. Brown’s writing echoes the description of girl-fights in the present study and reinforces the idea that girls’ friendships can be far from a safety haven; girls may and

often do attack each other's sexuality in the process of 'othering girls' (Thompson, 1994), putting them down, in an attempt to secure social status and power. And many girls' friendships and peer groups are indeed not a safe place for exploration of sexuality; when Tolman (2002) initiated her research project with adolescent girls, she discovered that girls were reluctant to discuss sexuality openly in a group format with their peers, perceiving a group setting to be unsafe.

Sexual pressure permeates much of the research on adolescent girls' sexuality; however, in their analysis of girls' narratives, writers usually investigate the nature of different pressures, leaving the interaction between the pressure and its source out. Participants in Karin Martin's research (1996) reported that direct pressure from boys was often the reason why girls became sexually active; they were either afraid that their partners would leave them if they refused or were coerced after expressing that they were not interested. Although Martin quoted a girl who was pressured into having sex during a Truth or Dare game, in her analyses, she did not differentiate this form of pressure from pressure from a boy to a girl within a relationship. The narratives of girls in the present research indicate that pressure dynamics between girls and boys are more intricate than previously reported. The source of pressure is rarely just individual boys, peer groups of boys and girls are often also a source of pressure, by encouraging individuals to engage in sexual activities. Other research accounts on pressure in the context of sexuality have also looked at the pressure girls face not to feel, know, or act on their sexual desire (Tolman, 2002). Narratives of the present study connect with this finding not only in the section discussing pressure for sexual experiences, by noting that sexual feelings are irrelevant to sexual experiences, but throughout the entire study.

In later interviews, the interaction of sexuality and social power came up through girls' insight about distribution of power and about stereotypes. Girls in some of the previous studies also commented about the subject; in Tolman's study (2002), some girls discussed having power when they had control about the sexual encounters they had and when they made wilful decisions about when to act and when not to act on their sexual desire. Kitzinger (1995) arrived at similar conclusions in her investigation into why girls persist to use sexual labels despite of their acknowledgement of the double standard. Power in this context was associated with intentional use of sexuality and sexual attractiveness to achieve some goal. Further, persistence of sexual labels is seen as females' way to continuously acknowledge their victimization in situations where they did not have power. Although power in personal sexual relationships was part of the narratives of the girls' in the present study, it was only part of the system. Power was also discussed in the broader context; association with socially powerful people, usually boys, is also girls' way to obtain social power and status.

Despite the aforementioned parallels between the present study and previous research, it is important to note that because most of the previous research focused on older girls at one point in time, it has often underestimated the magnitude of the complexity of girls' social circles. Further, given that most of the previous research focused on girls' personal experiences, it has often failed to produce a comprehensive picture of the social dynamics revealed in this study. The implications of the present findings on future research initiatives will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.3 - Family

The way girls talked about their families in the context of their sexuality changed in a number of ways. Later narratives exhibited the increasing independence and autonomy and decreased parental control of and involvement in girls' sexual relationships; dominating themes moved away from pressure and control to parental decreased involvement and distancing and familial support. Although familial control remained present in both waves of interviews, it changed from general messages about what a girl ought and ought not to do to specific rules some parents imposed on their daughters in the context of existing relationships. This transition can be explained by the increase in dating and sexual relationships with age. As girls' dating relationships became more serious, some parents felt the need to impose rules to "safeguard" their daughters. It is interesting to note that although dating and sexual relationships became more prominent, fewer girls discussed parental rules in later interviews. In addition, with time and maturity, siblings' influence on sexual and dating relationships decreased. Again, this change can be possibly attributed to an overall process of becoming more independent and mature. With time, more girls also talked about the way their families were supportive of their sexual experiences and relationships; they reported having more open communication with their families, feeling more comfortable to approach family members for information, and supporting the girls in general in their choices with regards to their relationships. It is also interesting to note that girls like Sarah, who reported their families to be distant and uninvolved, or girls like Lauren and Melissa, who reported being supportive and open, reported resisting to social pressure to engage in

monogamous relationships and developed relationships based on their interests and desires.

The present study demonstrates that family is an important factor in adolescent girls' socio-cultural contexts and is influential to girls' sexual experiences in different ways at different times in girls' adolescence. Familial influence on adolescents' sexual experiences and attitudes is prominent in quantitative research, with the majority of studies looking specifically at parents-daughter relationships (excluding siblings). It is reported that the strength of peer influence on sexuality is mediated by parent-adolescent communication (Wright, Peterson & Barnes, 1990). Although due to the qualitative nature of the present study it is impossible to determine a mediational relationship between family, peers, and girls' experiences, findings of the present study potentially reinforce this finding as girls' experiences within sexual relationships are strongly influenced by their families. Among college female students, parents are reported to have more influence on females' sexual attitudes than their peers, school, or books (Sanders & Mullis, 1988). Sibling relationships are also reportedly associated with adolescents' sexual activities, with adolescents with sexually-active older siblings being more likely to be sexually active themselves (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985). Overall, when looked as part of adolescents' broader socio-cultural context, family plays a major role in adolescents' sexual attitudes, particularly for girls (Werner-Wilson, 1998). The findings of the present study connect with findings from quantitative studies in that they reinforce the findings that parents and siblings play a determinant factor in girls' sexual experiences. However, quantitative work does not illuminate on what means of communication lead to which outcomes or on how this happens.

Although qualitative research also focuses primarily on parents-daughter relationship, it illuminates on the process through which familial relationships impact on girls' sexual experiences. It also reveals that the nature of the communication with parents and the messages girls receive from parents affects girls' sexual experiences. In Tolman's study (2002), girls whom Tolman classified as being disconnected from their sexual desire often reported having judgemental parents whom girls feared and with whom they did not communicate about sexuality. These girls also tended to report feeling scared of sexuality; they did not feel safe to discuss sexuality neither with friends nor with family members, leaving them scared and disconnected. On the other hand, girls whom Tolman classified as connected, tended to report open communication and support from their families, which, in turn also contributed to girls' ability to make informed decisions that were based on girls' desires and interests and to their safe sexual practices. The present study reinforces Tolman's findings, specifically with respect to Melissa's and Lauren's stories. However, Kelly's story, who reports having open and supportive relationship with her mother, demonstrates that parents can communicate specific values and promote disconnection within an open and supportive relationship. Phillips' research (2000) with older females indicates that parents often continue to discourage sexual experiences as girls mature and that young women often need to reconcile feelings of shame and fear of disappointing their parents with their own sexual desires and experiences. In Thompson's (1990) study, those girls who reflected with pleasure upon their first sexual intercourse and were tuned in to their bodily pleasures at the time, frequently reported that they spoke openly with their mothers about issues of sexuality. "The mothers of the pleasure narrators are forthcoming not just as to the biological facts

of life, but about adult life itself' (Thompson, 1990, p. 354). These mothers are breaking the culture's silence by talking about—and therefore validating— their daughters' sexual feelings. Adolescent girls are open to learning from and relying upon their mothers for support during these tumultuous times, but there needs to be a non-judgmental understanding of the reality of their experience (Welles, 2005). The present study provides an overall support for previous qualitative findings that parents facilitate girls' connection with their sexual feelings and girls' ability to act in accordance to their sexual feelings and general interests. The present study further contributes to the understanding of the subject by demonstrating some patterns of change in parental relation to girls' experiences over time and by the examination of the impact siblings may have on girls' sexual experiences.

4.4 - Partner

The change in girls' narratives about their sexual relationships with their partners was in terms of both, content and breadth, revealing that sexual decision making became more complicated with girls needing to consider many factors, including pressure, labelling, their families, and, sometimes, their sexual feelings. Many more themes emerged in the later wave of interviews; girls' stories were more developed and indicated a higher level of reflection and insight as well as greater experience with dating and sexual experiences. In earlier interviews, girls portrayed a gloom picture of their initial sexual and dating relationships, focusing on boys' dominance and on sexual pressure. Their stories revealed minimal agency as girls rarely initiated contact with boys they liked and usually waited for the boys to ask them out, ask them to dance, kiss them, etc'.

They also talked about sexual experiences mainly in terms of the pressure they experienced from their partners and about their ways of negotiating this pressure, which usually involved either submission or escape. Sexual desire was rarely mentioned if at all, revealing that girls' sexual decisions were often made in disconnection from their sexual feelings.

Sexual pressure continued to play a key role in later interviews as well, with more girls raising the subject. Then, however, drawing on more experiences, most girls did not only tell stories of how and where they were pressure, they also described more negotiation mechanisms, offered insight into what they thought helped elevate the pressure and how they coped with it. For instance, some girls mentioned that being friends with a boy before starting to date him usually helped them negotiate sexual activities without feeling pressured. As girls became more experiences with sexuality towards later interviews, they also discussed how they talk about sexuality with their partners, revealing what they learned from their experiences. For instance, some girls learned the value of giving feedback about what actions that their partners did they liked and which they didn't.

It is interesting to note that although sexual labelling was part of girls experiences within their peer groups in both waves of interviews, it is in the later interviews that girls discussed how labelling affected their sexual experiences and became a major factor in their sexual decision making. As discussed previously, with time social rules about sexual labelling became more intricate and labels more dangerous, which may have contributed to their prominent impact on girls' sexual decision making. With time, girls' reflection on sexual feelings and on the impact of their relationships on how they felt in and about their

bodies also emerged. Although not for all girls sexual feelings were a navigator of their sexual behaviour, more girls reported being connected with their feelings and recognizing the bodily sensations that indicated whether they were comfortable or not. Unfortunately, discussion of sexual feelings came after sexual experiences, as many girls initially used discourse empty of sexual feelings to describe sexual experiences and later on learned to listen to their bodies for voices of sexual feelings, and not the other way around.

Sexual pressure, fear of social consequences (e.g., labelling) and fear of STIs and pregnancy are echoed by girls and young women in research projects over and over again. Whether the focus of the study is sexual identity, sexual experiences or sexual desire, narratives of how girls and women make sexual experiences frequently include these factors as integral to their sexual decision making. For instance, in a qualitative study of young men's and women's experiences with their first significant dating partners (Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2005), the central framework for the discussion (for both men and women) was the decision of whether and when to engage in intercourse. Most of the young women reported that their partners expressed high interest in intercourse and frequently conveyed this message through their actions, indicating consistent level of pressure for sexual intercourse. Some girls in Phillips' study (2000) discussed sexual experiences which happened in the context of pressure from their partners, explaining, for instance, that "if you cross a certain line [boys] expect to go all the way" (p.123) and that it is often easier to engage in a sexual activity than to object it due to fear of being forced into the activity anyways. Further, many of the girls report consistently considering the impact of their sexual experiences on their social reputation, wondering whether what they want or are about to do will lead to their labeling and judgment. After dividing girls

into groups by their level of connection to their sexual desire, Tolman (2002) concluded that sexual desire and agency mediate between the various pressures and fears and girls' ways of coping with them. She noted that girls who displayed agency and who appeared to be more connected to their sexual desire displayed greater resistance to the various pressures. She further reported that such girls were more likely to display greater insight into the power dynamics between boys and girls and had increased sense of confidence in themselves. Although it is not possible to make a direct comparison between the present study's findings and Tolman's discussion because sexual desire was not the core of this study's analysis, some parallels are evident, particularly through the narratives of Melissa, Lauren, and Kyra, and Jessica, who display agency, assertiveness and insight and are tuned to their desires and interests.

Discussion of how girls and boys talk about sexuality, communicate about their sexual preferences, and negotiate comfort levels with their partners is virtually absent from research on girls' sexuality. It is usually mentioned in discussion of sexual pressure and is limited to how girls say or communicate a "yes" or a "no" in regards to a sexual activity (Martin, 1996; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2002). In qualitative research this topic is only investigated from a sexual health perspective in the context of condom use and safe sexual practices. This branch of investigation demonstrates that infrequent communication about sexuality between partners is associated with inconsistent condom use among young men and women (Crosby et al., 2002) and adolescents (Hillier, Harrison, & Warr, 1998). However, despite the lack of research on adolescents' communication about sexuality, it appears that how and whether adolescents talked about sex and practiced safe sex are strong normative influences in predicting safer sex among

individuals (Lear, 1995). Unfortunately, even in light of evidence that communication about sexuality between sexual partners is significant to safe sexual practices, there is no research that directly focuses on how adolescents talk about their sexuality. The discussion of the subject by girls in the present study is only a tip of the iceberg and further implications are to be discussed in upcoming sections.

Similar conclusions can be made about the discussion of girls' feelings about their bodies in the context of their sexual relationships. Discussion of the body in existing research on girls' sexuality is limited to girls' connection and disconnection to their sexual feelings. The impact of sexual experiences on girls' body image, for instance, has not been discussed. In qualitative studies, research in the area mostly focuses on girls and women who suffer from illnesses such as breast cancer (Anllo, 2000) and eating disorders (Mcgilley, 2006). Some studies looked at the association between body image and sexual experiences in adults. Findings suggest that individuals with poorer views of their bodies report less sexual experience, less sexual satisfaction, and less comfort with various elements of sexual activity (Ackard et al., 2000; Faith and Schare, 1993; Trapnell et al., 1997; Wiederman, 2000). Further, previous evidence suggests that the link between body satisfaction and sexual behaviour is not the same for males and females. That is, a positive view of one's body may lead males but not females to risky sexual behaviour (Gillen, Lefkowitz, & Shearer, 2006). The present study suggests that sexual experiences affect girls' attitudes towards their own bodies, usually leading girls to feel more attractive and happier with their bodies, which may, in turn, have implications on girls' sexual decisions. Further implications of these findings will be discussed later on in this chapter.

4.5 - In sum

In investigating the social context of girls' sexual experiences, the present research project connected with much of the research in the area. The broader scope of the project also produced findings that illuminate on other factors in girls' environments that influence girls' sexual experiences and elucidate the interrelationship between the various factors. Overall, the present project suggests that girls' sexual experiences begin at an earlier age than the age of focus of previous research. The present study also demonstrates that over time, girls' social contexts become more complex, emitting contradictory messages about what is expected from girls and about what is acceptable for girls to do. Thus, as girls mature and gain insight into their social contexts and into the power dynamics between genders, it is becoming more difficult for girls to navigate the course of their sexual experiences in a way that is true to their sexual desire and their interests.

4.6 - Protective factors: Becoming resilient

Girls' narratives in the present study illuminated on some protective factors that assist girls resist the pressures they experience and remain connected to and act in accordance with their sexual feelings. Girls with supportive families appeared to be more resistant to social pressures, negotiated sexual relationships on their own terms, and established good communication with their sexual partners. In addition, girls who reported being engaged in activities additional to school, such as having part-time jobs and playing sports, displayed greater agency as well as insight into the social dynamics. These findings connect to Karin Martin's writing about factors she found to promote

girls' agency and "sexual subjectivity", the idea that "one's sexuality affects her/his ability to act in the world, and to feel like she/he can will things and make them happen" (p. 10). She reported that girls' involvement in school and in sports and maternal encouragement that promotes independence appeared to foster girls' ability to resist pressure from boys to engage in sexual activities against their will and to learn about sexual pleasure. Tolman's writing also connects the present finding as it appears in both projects that more connected girls, girls who are more aware of their sexual feelings, and girls with greater insight are usually the ones who are able to resist pressures and act in accordance with their own interests. It appears, then, that there might be a chain of events that leads to girls' ability to not only recognize their sexual interests but to act in accordance to them. It is possible, that certain factors in girls' environments such as families and social activities promote girls' agency and curiosity and allow girls to discover and embrace their sexuality as they grow up and to let their bodies guide them through the sexual experiences they encounter. This, however, is only the beginning of a theory and the upcoming section will address the research necessary for its further development.

4.7 - Limitations

One of the limitations of the present study is its small sample size of only nine girls, which may limit the generalizability of the results. The sample of participants also consisted of predominantly Caucasian rural girls; some additional diversity in terms of residence and ethnic background would be desirable as there were no black or Asian girls in the study. Further, although prospective data was collected as girls were interviewed at

two points in time, narratives might not have been sufficient to produce a full picture of the developmental aspect of girls' sexuality; it would have been better if girls were also interviewed when they finished high-school and two or three years after that. Lastly, the study's broad scope which I have argued to serve as strength also serves as a weakness. Given that sexuality is not the only focal point of the research project, some information about girls' experiences is missing or is limited. This is particularly relevant to more sensitive topics such as sexual desire about which girls rarely speak spontaneously (Martin, 1996). Although sexuality was central to girls narratives, further elaboration about some aspects of sexuality would have been helpful.

4.8 - Direction for further research

Future research should focus on expanding the understanding of how the interrelationship between various factors in girls' social contexts affects girls' sexual experiences and girls' connection with their sexual feelings. As previously noted, most of the research to date has focused on older girls and young women at a single point in time. The present study indicates that girls' social contexts become sexualized at a much earlier age. Thus, future research projects with a prospective approach should include younger girls. Further qualitative research is also needed to illuminate on some themes that emerged in the present study and which have not been discussed elsewhere, including communication patterns between girls and their sexual partners about their sexual experiences. Although some protective factors emerged from the present discussion, further investigation is needed to establish what factors in girls' social contexts are particularly helpful in promoting resilience to pressures; this, in turn, can hopefully serve

as a basis for the development of educational programs that will promote girls' sexual health and connection with their bodies. It is important that future research projects include larger and more diverse samples in order to increase the generalizability of their results.

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