NO REGRETS:

“Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all”

The influence of romantic love on girls’ first experiences of consensual heterosexual intercourse: Young women share their stories.

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the relationship that love and romance have to young women’s experiences of and decisions to engage in heterosexual intercourse for the first time. Inspired by Sharon Thompson’s (1995) book Going All The Way, I wanted to listen to young women’s stories about love, romance and sex in order to better understand their first sexual experiences. I have interviewed six women based on their age (18-23), on whether their first experiences with sex were both heterosexual and consensual, and on whether their decisions to have ‘sex’ for the first time were influenced by a romantic relationship. I analyse the interview transcripts, contextualizing them within the relevant literature, and explore the ways popular culture and media might have influenced the girls in my study. I am concerned with intercourse because I want to gain a better understanding of young women’s experiences with it and to recognize what love and sex might mean to them. I was surprised to find that, even with third wave feminist ‘empowerment’ discourse and hyper-sexualized media and popular culture, the six women I spoke with felt that sex is about an expression of love and a “deeper connection of intimacy” (Krissy) rather than about empowerment or the fun of ‘doing it’. Even though I required that participants needed to have been influenced by a romantic relationship in their decisions to have intercourse for the first time, it was interesting to see the extent that they valued love in their relationships when love was not part of the criteria required to participate. The findings from this study will be useful to sex educators, including myself, who work with young women as well as to parents who might be able to worry less about their daughters, knowing that some girls are looking for love and commitment when they engage in intercourse, not simply casual sex or hook-ups.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

When I asked Krissy, one of the young women I interviewed, whether she believed love was necessary for sex, I was surprised by the conviction in her answer. Krissy told me “Yes! Sex is very personal to me. I am not a prude about it. I can talk about it, even laugh about it, but there is a lot of myself invested in the act of sex and intimacy so I couldn’t do it without love” (Krissy, personal communication, June 6th, 2010). Krissy also said “I think most women have sex because they want that deeper connection, in most cases. Sometimes that is not what we end up with, but I do feel like that is often what women are looking for – intimacy.” I had expected, with the abundance of sexuality in the media and the increasing number of moral panics about female adolescent sexuality, that the young women I talked with would use the popular discourse they have been exposed to and tell me that sex empowered them, and that they were more interested in pleasure and desire. I had even imagined some of the girls would value the physical aspects of sex as much as or more than love. Even though I was interviewing six young women whose decisions to have sex for the first time were influenced by a romantic relationship, I was nevertheless surprised when they told me how highly they valued love and long term commitment, and how important love was to their relationships, when, for example, they could have been using the cover of a romantic relationship as a socially acceptable place to experiment with desire, pleasure and sex. I had not expected to find concrete answers or truths when I started this project, but I had also not expected to find that all of the young women I talked with would value love so highly.
For most of my life, I have been the one to whom my friends come for advice, and the one with whom they share their stories. Over the years I began to see a trend: most of my girlfriends wanted to talk about boys. They wanted to discuss love, sex and romance, to tell me about their latest crushes, to ask me what they should do about romantic dilemmas. They wanted to share their stories with someone, someone who would listen and be confidential, non-judgemental and supportive, and offer an opinion. It will not be surprising to many of my friends that I have decided to spend the last few years reading about and researching sex and romance, and interviewing young women about their romantic feelings and the influence those feelings might have had on their decisions to have sexual intercourse for the first time. This thesis is my attempt to present the stories of six young women, looking critically at their stories about love, sex and romance in order to better understand their experiences.

This chapter begins with a look at a project that directly inspired my own: Sharon Thompson’s (1995) *Going All The Way*, a book that was created out of her interviews with 400 girls about their experiences with sex, romance and pregnancy. Then I examine the context of my project and explain how I attempted to answer my main research question: how do love and romance influence girls’ decisions to have heterosexual intercourse for the first time? Finally, I explore some of the problems in trying to define ‘sex’ and I conclude this chapter with a brief outline of chapters that will follow.

**Going All The Way**

Sex researcher Sharon Thompson published “*Going All The Way: Teenage Girls’ Tales of Sex, Love, and Pregnancy*” in 1995 after spending almost twenty years researching, interviewing, and talking to young women. From 1978 to 1986 Thompson talked to 400 girls, mostly one-on-one, about their experiences with romance, love, sex, pregnancy, and many things
related to teenage girls’ sexuality. Thompson conducted her research in the United States, mainly in large and midsize cities but sometimes in small towns and rural areas. She talked with girls who had sex with girls, girls who had sex with boys, and girls who had sex with both girls and boys. She talked with girls from all different social economic statuses, and with girls from many different ethnicities. She talked to girls who claimed to be ‘victims’ of love, girls who were playing the field, girls who were teenage mothers, girls who loved other girls, girls who treated love as a game and romance as a strategy, and girls who had sex with older adult men. Thompson believed that listening to girls and passing their stories on to other girls was the best way for girls to learn about sex, and the potential dangers of love so that they could protect themselves not only from heartbreak but also from STIs, pregnancy, inequality, and subordination. She found that many girls did not talk about sex in terms of pleasure but in terms of trading their virginity for ‘true love’ (Thompson, 1995). Some girls spoke about intercourse as something they needed to get out of the way, just another step in life, while others spoke of their promiscuity as an act of rebellion. Some of the girls had adult lovers with whom they traded sexual favours for love or ‘surrogate fathering.’ Thompson found that the more a girl associated intercourse with love, instead of pleasure or desire, the less likely she was to protect herself from pregnancy or disease, and the more likely she was to end up heartbroken (Thompson, 1995).

My project has been greatly influenced by Thompson’s work and I have used her research as a starting point for my own, following her suggestion to listen to the stories that girls have to tell, and hoping, as she hoped, that passing on girls’ stories might help future girls as they navigate their own way through sex, love, and romance. Because I had read this book, I was initially interested in talking to women about heartbreak, but what I learned from the research is the importance of love and romance to girls. It is the argument of this thesis that the six girls I spoke with have placed a high value and importance on love, and have a desire to love, especially
in their sexual relationships. This desire to love seems to be socially constructed, through examples of love, sex, relationships and gender roles in the media especially. Despite discourses of empowerment, casual sex and hooking-up culture, all six of the women I spoke with still highly valued love and wanted it to be a part of their first sexual experiences.

**The context and inspiration behind my project**

“I thought you dated someone because you loved them and you saw a future with them. I was never the type of person to date someone for the sake of it. The relationship had to have a future – the future always being marriage – and if it didn’t then it was no longer worth the time or commitment required” stated Krissy, one of the young women who participated in my project.

Nearly forty years after sex researcher Sharon Thompson (1995) began her research and started interviewing teenage girls about their experiences with love, sex and pregnancy, I decided I wanted to continue the feminist tradition of letting young women share their stories. Inspired by Thompson’s 1995 book, I wanted to take what I had learned from her research and apply it to my own project. Some of the young women in my project, like Krissy, had much in common with some of the girls whom Thompson had interviewed in the late 1970s and 1980s. Krissy and some of the girls Thompson talked to believed that the point of dating was to find love in a long term relationship. When Thompson first interviewed sixteen year old Tracy, for example, Tracy was considering ‘losing her virginity.’ Although Tracy stated that she was “not going to just give it up to anyone,” she was thinking of having penile-vaginal intercourse for the first time with a boy with whom she had been on a handful of dates (Thompson, 1995, p. 21). Tracy and her friends told Thompson that they were worried about being abandoned by their boyfriends after ‘giving in’ to having sex. Tracy said: “I just want the person to care enough and not to say, ‘I got what I wanted,’ and then just run out on me, because that would hurt me a lot” (p. 21). Thompson wrote
that being seduced and abandoned is one of the oldest fears in the history of female experience
and that young women can be,

ruined... not by sex or pregnancy but by love. The damage [isn’t] to her hymen, her
health, or her marital chances; her ruin [is] psychological. She [is] old enough for sex but
too young to go through the emotional distress of believing a love was true, having
intercourse, and getting dumped. (p. 22)

Thompson suggested that Tracy and other teenage girls had limited traditions to draw upon when
it came to negotiating first intercourse. The popular fairytale of ‘true love,’ in which love and sex
are inextricably linked, is a common influence on decisions of when to have sex (Beall &
Sternberg, 1995; Schafer, 2008; Tsui & Nicoladis, 2004; Carpenter, 2001, 2005). According to
Tracy even high school sex education proposed that young people ‘wait for love’ before having
intercourse (Thompson, 1995).

The girls in Thompson’s study helped demonstrate some of the complexity that goes into
the negotiations and decisions about first intercourse; the young women in my project similarly
pointed to these complexities. Like sociologists Joyce Abma, Anne Driscoll and Kristin Moore
(1998), Thompson was interested in the ambivalence or even the negativity many women feel
about their first sexual experiences. She wanted to provide young women with tools that could
help protect them from post-intercourse feelings of ambivalence. Of the 400 girls Thompson
interviewed, all were moved to pass on their stories by Thompson’s promise that she would share
their stories with other girls. Thompson observed that “even the most antifeminist [girls] felt
obligated to give other girls the advantage of their experience. They wished they had had that
advantage themselves” (p. 13). This sharing of young women’s experiences is the tool Thompson
made available to help other young women; it also turned out to be one of the things that
motivated the young women in my study to volunteer to participate.

Inspired by Thompson’s (1995) research, I wanted to examine some of the ways young
women reflect on love, sex and romance. The women I talked to offered personal narratives about
sex and love that helped to shed light on the dominant discourses that have influenced their experiences.

**Research Question**

My project responds to one main question:

- How do love and romance influence young women’s decisions to have heterosexual intercourse for the first time?

**My Project**

My research involved discussions with six young women from Queen’s University whose decisions to engage in their first experience of heterosexual intercourse were influenced by a romantic relationship. This is the story of these six white university educated women. Although these women are each very different, they do share some experiences. I wanted to learn about young women’s experiences of love and romance, and the influences love had on their decisions to have sex for the first time.

Heterosexual intercourse is over-valued in our culture and, therefore, in many young women’s lives and experiences, so there are many dominant discourses surrounding heterosexual intercourse, virginity loss, and love, which I have explored in this project. Like feminist researchers before me, one of my main goals was to create a safe space for women to share some of the intimate details of their personal narratives about love, sex, and romance (Bouris, 1993; Thompson, 1995; Carpenter, 2001, 2005). One of the most significant stories a woman can tell is of her first experiences with sex, romance, and love. This is because these experiences play such important roles in the social and cultural construction of women’s lives, defining how many women view their bodies, their sexualities, and the central meanings of their lives. The language
reinforcing gender roles surrounding first heterosexual intercourse plays a large role in socially constructing the experience of ‘virginity loss’ for young women, a point I will discuss later in this project. During my interviews I observed what Karen Bouris (1993) described when she wrote,

Something about telling the story to a neutral party gave women the guts to look at themselves and their sexuality, often with startling insight. Women exposed their secret, sexual self – a self usually reserved for intimate bedroom conversations, sessions with a therapist, or deemed too private to show anyone at all. (p. 13)

Like the women in Bouris’s book, the women I interviewed also thanked me for asking them questions and for letting them participate and I am grateful to them for being willing to share their stories. It can be cathartic to share a story and some of the women I talked with might have gained a sense of self-awareness or might have come to look at their stories from a different perspective or with different meaning after having shared them with me (Bouris, 1993; Thompson, 1995; Potts, 2002; Tolman, 2002; Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997).

Finally, I set out on this project hoping that it might contribute to my ability to teach sex education, as well as work with and better understand the perspectives of young women clients at the Sexual Health Resource Centre (SHRC) where I volunteer. Like Sharon Thompson (1995), Gloria Schafer (2008), Ayala Malach Pines (2001) and Kate Milnes (2004), who discuss the practical implications of love and romantic feelings for sexual health outcomes, I also believe that romantic love can pose a danger to young women in terms of unprotected sex leading to increased risk of STIs, unplanned pregnancies, and broken hearts (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Thompson, 1995, 1994). I wanted to understand better some of the motivations behind young women’s decisions to engage in sexual relationships in order to become a better sexual health educator, as well as a better friend. My findings might also help calm parents’ fears about their daughters’ participation in casual sex, oral sex parties, and hooking up culture. The moral panics about female adolescent sexuality seem to be far out of proportion, at least to what the six girls I spoke
with are actually doing today, and if my research can help calm worried parents and educators then I will feel like my project was more successful than I had initially imagined it could be.

**Problems (un)defining ‘sex’**

I feel that it is important to begin by mentioning one of the most challenging problems that currently exists in sex research. This problem influences sexual health campaigns, sexual identity discourse, and numerous other sexuality-related discussions. How do we define ‘sex’? Researchers are expected to describe our objects of study and to communicate them to our “human subjects.” But, there currently exists no standard definition of ‘sex’ – not between researchers or physicians or adolescents themselves (Christina, 1992; Hamill & Chepko, 2005; Uecker, Angotti & Regnerus, 2008; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007; Morrison et al, 2008; Medley-Rath, 2007; Gute, Eshbaugh & Wiersma, 2008; Potts, 2002; Carpenter, 2001; Bogart et al, 2000; Kaye, 2006). Different definitions of sex can have a positive or negative impact on people’s health and on their ability to make informed decisions regarding sex. They can also have important implications for public health and health promotion programs, for instance in campaigns for ‘safer sex’ that fail to explain what ‘sex’ means (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007; Carpenter, 2001). How can someone practice something more safely if they do not even know what that something is in the first place?

As became obvious in my interviews, and as we can easily see in the discourses and literature surrounding heterosexual sex, sex is most often defined as penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse. A research project carried out by Gary Gute, Elaine Eshbaugh, and Jacquelyn Wiersma (2008) found that the 839 undergraduates in their study could only agree that one type of activity constituted ‘having sex’ all of the time, and that was penile-vaginal intercourse.
In this thesis, I am not looking to ‘solve the problem’ of defining sex (if it is indeed a problem that needs solving), nor am I looking to find an answer to how we might create (if we would even want to or be able to create) any universal definition. I have not overtly defined ‘sex’ or ‘heterosexual intercourse’ but I did speak with young women who self-identified as having already experienced consensual heterosexual intercourse. My goal has been to interpret and talk about people’s definitions of sex in a flexible way. I have taken cues from my participants and changed my language to reflect their own. I have tried to be non-assumptive and non-judgemental about the different ways people – including young women involved in heterosexual romantic relationships - engage in sexual practices.

I do understand that this majority-rules agreement that penile-vaginal penetration results in virginity loss exemplifies the hetero-assumptive attitude that many people consciously or unconsciously uphold. The ‘virginity loss’ terminology – that women are losing something (to men) – is also highly problematic, and I will discuss some of these problems later in this project. The idea that penetrative intercourse is the only true form of ‘sex’ plays a role in upholding patriarchal gender roles as well as dominant heterosexual discourses and privilege. This language has also led researchers, especially queer and feminist researchers, to come up with non-hetero-assumptive definitions of sex and to write about first sex from a non-heteronormative perspective (Christina, 1992; Potts, 2002). Greta Christina (1992), for example, examines some of the problems that can arise when using a traditional definition of heterosexual penile-vaginal penetrative intercourse. Christina (1992) takes a look at her own sexual experiences and finds that no matter how hard she tries, she cannot seem to define sex or decide which of her sexual experiences constitute ‘sex’. Should sex be defined by consent? By conscious, mutually acknowledged shared pleasure? By feeling sexy? One of Christina’s (1992) friends suggests that if you thought of it as sex when you were doing it, then it was sex. In the end, Christina (1992)
decides there might not be an all encompassing definition of what constitutes ‘sex’. She does, however, believe that sex should not be limited to hetero definitions of penile-vaginal penetration. She also believes that when straight sex is assumed to be the normal type of sex there will be problems.

One of the reasons that I chose to write about heterosex is that there are so many popular discourses, because of the normalization of heterosex, for young women to pull from when they are describing their experiences with this type of sex. I wanted to talk about something that is often the defining act of love in a straight relationship and that young women place a lot of importance on. Many women and men are familiar with the fairy tale, Disney-love-story discourse where true love’s kiss from Prince Charming can wake up a sleeping princess. More contemporary discourses around heterosexual sex were put into circulation on the popular TV show *Sex and the City*. *Sex and the City* discourses – in which successful urban women can have unattached ‘single girl’ sex ‘just like men’ yet still manage to settle down with prince charming when the time is right – have likely influenced many young women who watched the show, an idea I will discuss later in this thesis (Markle, 2008). Discourses of heterosex appear in newspaper and magazine articles meant to ‘empower’ women, but to empower them through teaching them how to lose weight, be a tigress in the bedroom, or spend enough time in the kitchen to become their own version of Julia Child while also learning how to use the big cans of soup to strengthen their biceps and become more hegemonically attractive – all so they can find the ‘right man’ to settle down with. These ideas of ‘empowerment’ often align with heteronormative socially constructed beauty norms rather than critique them. Romantic comedies, spy movies, thrillers, action adventure films, and ‘chick flicks’ alike all advertise heteronormative perspectives and try to prepare young women for womanhood – which is often a pseudonym for housewife, or now, in the ‘modern world’, for the role of working woman *and* housewife.
Discourses surrounding straight romance, including stories of love, marriage, and family that can be missing from or different in queer or non-hetero discourses, are important for understanding the risks and negotiations around intercourse (Schafer, 2008; Malach Pines, 2001; Milnes, 2004; Kirkman, Rosenthal & Smith, 1998).

Heteronormative discourse does not go without critique. Many scholars have offered up important discourse analyses of heteronormative discourse (Potts, 2002; Christina, 1992; Markle, 2008; Gamson, 2006). My focus here has not been on the critiquing of such discourses. Nor has it been my goal to “queer” sexuality (Potts, 2002; Christina, 1992; Markle, 2008; Gamson, 2006). My examination in the following chapters will hopefully illustrate some of the problems with popular heteronormative discourses, especially normative gender roles, without undermining the young women’s voices in my study. My project will also show the potentially positive side to popular discourses – that they might also be protecting some young women from engaging in a hooking-up culture that can cause moral panics in the media right now. That popular discourse can be both problematic and beneficial are not mutually exclusive ideas.

**Chapter Outline**

In the chapters that follow, I discuss how notions of love and romance might have influenced six young women’s decisions to have heterosexual intercourse. In doing so I consider the influences of popular culture on young women today, looking at the media as the biggest influence on young women’s conceptions of sex, love, romance, and gender roles. In the chapters that follow I will be using both ‘girls’ and ‘young women’ to describe the participants. I recognize the critique of the term ‘girl’ but it is a word that both my peers and participants use (and used during the interviews) so I have found it to be appropriate to use both terms during my writing.
In Chapter two I provide a brief historical and cultural context for my study. I talk about the legalization of birth control and abortion. I discuss some of the feminist influences on young women and examine how television shows like *Sex and the City*, popular music lyrics, and other media can influence young women. I then move on to discuss the moral panics about female adolescent sexuality, briefly examining the so-called oral sex ‘epidemic’. I conclude the chapter by briefly examining the current state of sexual health education.

In chapter three, the literature review, I begin by discussing love, and how difficult it is to define love. I look at first sex and the problematic language of ‘virginity loss’. I look at the relationship between love and first sex and examine other research in the area. I move on to briefly examine the relationship between love and heartbreak. I discuss the small amount of literature on love and ‘irrational’ decision making about safe(r) sex and the negative impacts love can have on some young women. I also look at studies that offer insights on trading sex in the hopes of gaining love and I conclude the chapter by discussing the sexual double standard and the impact it has on young women.

Chapter four, methodology, describes my project in detail. The chapter begins by discussing what I did in my project and describing my pilot interviews, participant recruitment and participant characteristics. I describe my data collection, interviews, and data transcription and analysis in detail. I describe the importance of interviewing, of qualitative research and of feminist methodology. I conclude the chapter by discussing some of the tensions in research, especially in sexuality research.

In Chapter five, narratives of love and sex, I present material from the interview transcripts, contextualizing and evaluating it. I begin this chapter by briefly describing the six young women I interviewed. In this chapter I investigate my main research question, How do love and romance influence young women’s decisions to have heterosexual intercourse for the
first time? I look at what the girls I spoke to have to say about their experiences with love, romance and sex. I examine the young women’s definitions of love and how they believe men and women love differently. I discuss what they believe to be one of the main influences on their sexualities, the media, and how television shows like Sex and the City and Disney movies might have influenced their experiences and understandings of love and sex. I look at the sexual double standard and how love (or being in a relationship) can legitimate sex for young women. I explore what the women thought the point of dating was and how some of them prepared for their first sex. I briefly examine heartbreak, and how heartbreak did not end up playing as large a role in these six young women’s experiences as I had imagined it might. Finally, I discuss how some women, regardless of the outcome of their first sexual experiences, have ‘no regrets’.

In chapter six, the conclusion, I discuss some of the limitations of my analysis and examine some future implications of my research, especially its relevance for sexual health education.
Chapter 2

Context

Even though I interviewed young women who had been influenced by a romantic relationship, when I began this project I still imagined I might hear that third wave feminism and this era of hyper-sexualized popular culture would have influenced girls today to feel that sex was empowering and a great way to enjoy pleasure and desire. But the girls I spoke with told me a different story and I now believe that despite (and because of) some popular culture, some young women today still desire love, romance and long term commitment.

This chapter begins with a look at some of the important changes that have shaped sexuality over the past few decades, mainly relating to birth control and abortion, and that helped propel the feminist movement, which I briefly discuss, through the 1960s and 1970s right up to now. I focus this chapter on the one thing that all the young women I spoke with cited as the most influential on popular perceptions of love and sex: the media. I look at television shows, song lyrics, and at moral panics in the media about oral sex and female sexuality. I also look at the current status of sex education in Ontario and hypothesize about some of the potential implications this sex education might have on young women in this cultural context.

There is currently a gap in the literature when it comes to media influences on young women today and how they might, in fact, promote waiting for love to have sex, rather than simply influencing young women to have casual sex or be friends-with-benefits as some of the current moral panics about teen sexuality would have us believe. My project attempts to add to the literature on young women and love and sex and to demonstrate how the media still encourages girls to want love in their sexual relationships. I hope my project will be useful to sexual health educators, in terms of helping young women to understand better their feelings of
love and to be more aware of the potential consequences love can have on safe(r) sex. I also hope that it will be helpful to parents, in terms of calming down their fears that their daughters are casually hooking-up or participating in ‘rainbow parties’ as it seems that love is still important for some young women, even if moral panics are premised on the assumption that it is not.

**Birth Control and Abortion**

A number of key events in the recent history of sexuality are important in terms of the context of this study. In 1960 the Federal Drug Association (FDA) approved the birth control pill in the United States. In Canada, the birth control pill was introduced in 1961. But it was not until August of 1969 that it was approved for use and that contraceptives were decriminalized and abortions were legalized (Doan & Williams, 2008; Sethna, 2006). Even under the new legislation in 1969, however, some contraceptives, like the pill and intrauterine devices, still required a medical prescription, and abortions, though newly legalized, were not necessarily any more accessible (McLaren & McLaren, 1997; Sethna, 2006). A woman wanting a therapeutic abortion in Canada had to get referred by her doctor to a hospital’s therapeutic abortion committee (TAC), which consisted of three to five doctors who ruled whether they believed the abortion would preserve the woman’s life or health (Sethna, 2006). As Christabelle Sethna writes, some of the biggest problems with this, apart from the obvious problem that a committee could decide the maternal status of a woman, were that there were no consistent definitions of ‘health’, not all hospitals had TACs, and many doctors refused to perform abortions, causing women to continue to turn to underground or illegal procedures (Sethna, 2006).

Even with the problems that still existed, the legalization of birth control and abortion were important steps towards gaining women’s rights. The editors of the *Birth Control Handbook* at McGill University in 1969 believed the birth control pill was the “first drug to weaken male
society’s control over women” (Sethna, 2006, p. 101). According to Sharon Thompson, the time between the legalization of contraceptives and abortion and the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s was an “amazing period in the history of sex... when [girls] knew of almost no reasons not to have sex” (Thompson, 1995, p. 11). With women gaining access to the pill, they also gained access to the freedom of sexuality and could ideally, for the first time, separate sexual pleasure from marriage and procreation (Luker, 2006). Even when women were not having sex because of fear of pregnancy they were still exercising agency. This freedom to express their sexuality and allow themselves the agency to become their own sexual decision makers helped to pave the path to today. Women now have the potential to take their sexuality into their own hands and have sex without the worry of unwanted pregnancy, which could lead to freer sexual experiences with fewer strings attached. With the increasing availability of birth control even young girls are becoming more able to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancy. The Public Health Agency of Canada, for example, recently reported a nation-wide survey which found that 36% of grade 9 girls and 33% of grade 10 girls in Canada say they use birth control pills (Boyce, King & Roche, 2008). Young women today have a lot more options on how to take control of their sexualities than did young women fifty years ago.

**Feminism today**

Feminism today is constructed through many different complex and contradictory discourses and encompasses a wide range of perspectives and approaches. During the 1960s second wave feminism responded to the post-war roles of women, social justice struggles, and the growing understanding that if women wanted their voices to be heard they would need to develop their own ways of fighting for their political and social needs and their own organizations. Researchers who began their careers during this period often had a shared motivation in their
projects - the desire to let women’s voices be heard – which might have stemmed from the second wave feminist goal of letting women share their voices and their stories. Though I shared a similar goal in my own project, my academic upbringing was quite different from earlier feminists as I have been a student through the beginning of what some people call the third wave of feminism. While there is some debate within and amongst feminists about the third wave, and the idea of ‘waves’ in general, many would agree that the third wave started once it was realized that the goals of the second wave had not been fully met (Levy, 2005). Third wave feminists have tried to demonstrate that ‘we’, as women, do not all share a collective set of experiences or of an all encompassing ‘feminism’. Some third wave feminists have reclaimed symbols of womanhood like ‘girl power’ even going so far as to re-claim terms like ‘slut’ and ‘whore’ and to reinvent them in a positive way (Gillis, Howie & Munford, 2004; Gill, 2003). Some third wave feminists write about empowerment and about how femininity can be empowering, a belief that likely influenced the women I spoke to (Siegel, 1997; Comella, 2003; Gill, 2003).

The third wave of feminism, which some would say was created as a critique of the kinds of politics that showed up in the second wave, has had an impact on the women in my project. One of the main differences between the second and third wave of feminism that is important to note for my project is that the third wave is more likely to embrace the contradictions and ambiguity within feminism and has many different goals and objectives than the earlier 1960s second wave did (Siegal, 1997; Henry, 2004). Third wave feminism, it might be said, arose out of the need to create multiple feminist identities that could accommodate ambiguity and multiple positionalities (Siegal, 1997, p. 53). The third wave distinguishes itself from the first and second waves by promoting the notion, as Ednie Garrison stated, that “simultaneous confidence and uncertainty about what constitutes feminism doesn’t have to be conceptualized as a ‘problem’” (as cited in Siegal, 1997, p. 53). That there are many different kinds of feminism and feminists
sometimes makes the task of trying to understand feminism a challenging one, though all of the women I spoke with saw feminism as having influenced different parts of their lives, and different parts of popular culture and the media.

Feminist researcher Ariel Levy’s (2005) book on female ‘raunch culture’ suggests that some women today believe the goals of ‘the feminist project’ – the fall of patriarchy and the attainment of female equality – have been achieved. Feminism is not dead they claim, we just live in a post-feminist world (Levy, 2005). Levy herself believes that,

> Women’s liberation and empowerment are terms feminists started using to talk about casting off the limitations imposed upon women and demanding equality. We have perverted these words. The freedom to be sexually provocative or promiscuous is not enough freedom; it is not the only “women’s issue” worth paying attention to. And we are not even free in the sexual arena. We have simply adopted a new norm, a new role to play: lusty, busty, exhibitionist. There are other choices. If we are really going to be sexually liberated, we need to make room for a range of options as wide as the variety of human desire. We need to allow ourselves the freedom to figure out what we internally want from sex instead of mimicking whatever popular culture holds up to us as sexy. That would be sexual liberation. (p. 200)

Levy suggests that buying into the playboy bunnies, for example, is selling out the original intentions of the feminist project. That is, to create equality for women. Although I agree that there have been important historical events that have been crucial for gaining women’s rights since the 1960s, I also believe there is still a long way to go, especially when it comes to the sexual double standard and the moral panics that seem to centre around adolescent female sexuality, ignoring the males involved in the same ‘epidemics’, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Like Levy, other researchers in the field of female sexuality suggest that ‘the feminist project’ is far from being achieved. Sex researcher Michael Kimmel (2010), for example, recently published an article in Ms. Magazine about the October 2010 video of male fraternity pledges at Yale University marching around and shouting “No means yes! Yes means anal” in his attempt to bring to light the terrifying fact that even today there is public encouragement for men to sexually
abuse women. Kimmel (2010) suggested that to chant “No means Yes” outside of the campus Women’s Centre, a place offering safe space for women who have been assaulted or abused, reminds women that they still live in a world of gender inequality where men still ‘rule’. These findings are one example demonstrating that the feminist project that seeks gender equality still has a long way to go.

Some women try to achieve their own feminist project of gender equality by trying to become more ‘like a man’, a strategy that I, along with others, consider to be problematic (Levy, 2005; Markle, 2008). Ariel Levy (2005) and Gail Markle (2008) believe that women who are trying to be more like men demonstrate that womanhood is something to escape from, something less than manhood, and that for women to succeed they must try and become less womanly and more manly. These researchers, along with myself and others, believe that young people today are overwhelmed with contradictory pressures, that they exist in a society filled with mixed messages about how they should express their sexuality (Levy, 2005; Markle, 2008; Doan & Williams, 2008; Levine, 2002; Bouris, 1993; Lesko, 2001; Potts, 2002). There are conflicting pressures both to have and not to have sex. Even if no one explicitly sits teens down and explains the social rules of sexuality, they are somehow expected to understand the sexual norms of the age and this can lead to conflict as it seems both acceptable and unacceptable for young women to have sex (Rubin, 1990; Bouris, 1993). Karen Bouris (1993), author of *The First Time: What Parents and Teenage Girls should know about ‘losing your virginity’* argues that,

To be a virgin is both desirable and undesirable: You are fresh and marriageable; you are inexperienced and unappealing. To be sexually active is both desirable and undesirable: You are attractive, seductive, and comfortable with your sexuality; you’ve been around the block a few too many times. (p. 19)

It is contradictions like these that can make it difficult for a young woman to grow into a confident sexual being or to adhere to the sexual rules of the day, especially when the rules have been made by someone else, and are contradictory. It may be difficult to avoid the social
pressures one might feel to have sex, from advertising, television and other media that present sexual activity glamorously and as a way to grow up and move away from childhood. It may also be difficult to reconcile these with similar social pressures that might cause one to feel they ought to wait, from advertising, television, and other media that present early female sexual activity as the first step towards a life of being known as a fallen woman or towards an unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection (Bouris, 1993; Rubin, 1990; Doan & Williams, 2008; Levy, 2005).

The task then is to simultaneously show that you are not the same as the girly-girls in the videos and the Victoria’s Secret catalogues, but that you approve of men’s appreciation for them, and that possibly you too have some of that same sexy energy and underwear underneath all your aggression and wit. (Levy, 2005, p. 99)

Levy suggests that women seem to be faced with the task of both embracing feminist ideals while being critical of them. This can make it increasingly difficult to tell where many women stand on a feminist spectrum. I think that women should be free to make their own informed decisions as to how they want to identify or express themselves or their femininities. I do not, however, believe that most women are aware of the different meanings that are often (incorrectly) applied to the way that they do choose to express their gendered selves. I think that it is important to be aware that many women are faced with the difficult task of trying to be both feminist and feminine, and though these terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive they are often complicated and difficult to embody.

The women I have interviewed have also grown up feeling the pressures of contradictory information. These contradictions can be seen in chapter five by the ways that some of the women I talked to answered some of my questions; Alex, for example, did not want her number of sexual partners to increase because she feared she might gain a negative reputation, yet she still wanted to express her love through sex. It can be obvious that young women are drawing on popular discourse when answering questions about their sexuality. It is often easy to see the
influence of popular television shows, magazines or movies on the ways that young women ‘appropriately’ answer questions about their sexual subjectivities, as I demonstrate in chapter five by drawing attention to the references the women I talked with made to *Sex and the City*, Disney, and other media examples.

Young women growing up in a culture where popular music videos and lyrics can promote violence against women and other forms of gender inequality, and where advertising campaigns often focus on the sex appeal of young women’s bodies, might find it difficult to determine where feminism currently stands. Maybe that is one of the reasons that there are so many different types of feminists and feminisms. Levy (2005) suggests that there is a maze of contradictions within the feminist movement(s). There are conservative republican feminists, left wing liberal democrat feminists, libertarian feminists, feminist pornographers, feminists against pornography, pro-sex feminists, feminists for sex workers rights, feminist separatists, feminist supermodels, and feminist S/M lesbians. Some people claim that there are too many contradictions within these types of ‘feminism’ to actually accept that they might all be ‘feminists’ (hooks, 2000).

While feminism fifty years ago was more concerned with fighting for women’s rights and fighting to have women’s political, economic and social needs met through creating their own organizations, feminism now is concerned with a much wider range of issues. Feminism today asks different questions than it used to, especially when it comes to sexuality. No longer are the main topics of discussion centered around birth control, abortion, and reproductive technologies. There are so many different feminisms today that all ask different questions and make different arguments. *Ms.*, a feminist American magazine for example, has been publishing stories centred on women’s rights since the early 1970s. Some of the magazine’s most famous articles, published in the early 1970s when the magazine was created, were about such topics as birth control,
abortion, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. Though the magazine still publishes stories on those topics, current debates in the magazine feature the medicalization of female sexuality, including the pathologization of menstruation (Caplan, 2008), and the examination of popular television shows, like *Desperate Housewives* and asking whether it is “good feminist fun, or sexist backlash?” (Seigel & Pozner, 2005) or like *Mad Men* which the magazine uses to demonstrate how far “we” as feminists have come but how far we still have to go (Dove-Viebahn, 2010). Other debates in contemporary feminism include discussions about beauty norms and ideals which range in topic from eight year old girls who are being targeted for anti-aging makeup (Ormsby, 2011) to the risks women will take to have cosmetic surgeries (Franco, 2008; Latham, 2008; Morgan, 1998; Bartky, 1990b) to female bodies and obesity discourse (Taylor, 2011; Rail & Lafrance, 2008; Murray, 2008; Bordo, 1993). Current debates in feminism include hundreds of different topics, with different feminists often differing in their opinions and arguments of the same topics.

That there are so many different ways people today can express their ‘feminism’ is important to my project as it means that there are many different ways that these feminisms can influence young women. There are now more sexual scripts (which contextualize people’s sexual lives as governed by socially learned sets of desires) available to young women than ever before, making it possible for women with a wide range of beliefs to all call themselves feminists (Carpenter, 2009).

One of the ways young women learn about the relationship between feminism and femininity is through popular television shows. I believe media, especially television shows, are especially important and relevant as they were the main factors the young women I spoke to cited as having influenced their ideas about love and sex, a finding I will discuss in more depth in chapter five.
Mediated Femininity

Public fascination with and, at times, fear of teenage girls’ sexuality is present in popular culture today. As I will discuss later in this chapter, moral panics over sexuality have been topics of discussion for the past several decades. Television shows are taking advantage of this fascination with female sexuality by continually creating programs that exploit it, drawing audiences in by documenting ‘real life’ sexuality dilemmas for young women.

One such show, *16 and Pregnant*, premiered on June 11, 2009 on the American cable television network MTV. The show followed the stories of six pregnant girls who were in high school. Six months later MTV released a spin-off series called *Teen Mom: The first year* which recorded four of the six teen moms from *16 and Pregnant* through their first year of motherhood. The pilot episode this past December was the highest rated premiere on MTV in more than a year with 2.1 million viewers (Weprin, 2009). The popularity of this television show was not unexpected; some of the most popular movies and television series in the last decade have also featured young women who found themselves pregnant, for example, *Juno*, * Knocked Up*, *Waitress*, *Saved!, Friends* and *Glee*. These same movies and television shows have also focused on other aspects of women’s sexuality: *Friends* had many episodes that focussed on issues like casual sexual hook-ups, friends-with-benefits, gender roles, breast augmentation, and gender and sexual stereotypes. The popularity of these television shows suggests to me that interest in sexuality is widespread today.

Television shows like *Sex and the City* or the hyper-sexualized teen drama *Gossip Girl* demonstrate the tensions that lie in portrayals of young women’s sexuality as the desire, passion and curiosity that young women are shown to have in these shows are subject to much media criticism. Tensions about women’s sexuality often results from the contradictory messages
reinforcing the sexual double standard that young women receive through the media, to be both innocent and seductive, as I argued earlier in this chapter. In the last few years quotes like “every parent’s nightmare” and “mind-blowingly inappropriate” from the Parents Television Council (PTC), an organization whose purpose is to help parents make informed decisions about whether television shows might be appropriate for their children, have been used by the promoters of Gossip Girls in order to appeal to young people. The idea that young people are rebellious so will be drawn to anything their parents believe is inappropriate is the main motivator behind this advertising plan and it seems to have worked: the show’s second season had 3.43 million viewers (Calabria, 2008).

Though much of the content on popular television shows like Gossip Girl, Sex and the City, and Grey’s Anatomy is explicit and sexually graphic, which might be one of the reasons parents call them “inappropriate”, many of these popular television shows actually focus on the main characters’ quests to find long-term love and commitment in their sexual relationships. Take Sex and the City for example.

Many young women today grew up watching the popular series, which chronicled the lives of four successful New York women and often divided human behaviour into two categories: ‘like a man’s’ or ‘like a woman’s’ (Levy, 2005; hooks, 2000). Of the four main characters on the show, Samantha had the ‘ego of a man’ and often tried to have sex ‘like a man’ as well as have a successful career ‘like a man’. Miranda was a lawyer conflicted by her desire to have a family and also become a partner in a big law firm. Charlotte, the most ‘like a woman’ of the group was chastised for ‘turning into a man’ when she decided to make two dates in one night. To keep her ‘like a woman’ however, the writers of the show had her worry about whether she would be able to eat two meals in a row rather than about how great it might be to sleep with two men in one night. In the pilot episode, Carrie, the main character, was seen lying next to a
man in bed. Suddenly she got up and said “I’ll give you a call, maybe we can do it again sometime” suggesting that maybe they were not dating but were just friends, or ‘friends with benefits’ (Levy, 2005, p. 170). Carrie spends much of her time at the beginning of the series trying to transgress gendered roles in her mission to have sex ‘like a man’, that is, without feeling or commitment and for pleasure only (Markle, 2008). This desire of the lead characters on a popular television series to become more like men, while maintaining their femininity by buying expensive strappy high heels and wearing the latest high fashion, has important implications for my project because these television characters likely influenced the young women I have interviewed (hooks, 2000; Brasfield, 2006). More than one of the women I spoke with cited the show as having influenced their perceptions of love and sex. With 10.6 million viewers tuning in to the show when it was in production, ‘Carrie Bradshaw’ became a household name for millions of people and a role model for many women, including some of the women I spoke with (Levy, 2005; Southard, 2008; Gerhard, 2005).

Some research suggests that there was a problem in the basic premise of the show. Rosalind Gill (2003) writes that the idea that women can freely chose to objectify themselves for their own pleasure “fits very well within the post-feminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances, who can somehow choose to use beauty to make themselves feel good” (p. 104). Gill (2003) writes that the show is really just an excuse for women to buy into heteronormativity and impossible beauty norms.

Belinda Southard has suggested that Sex and the City offers hope for feminism by challenging social norms while embodying complex feminist identities and demonstrating the struggles within key feminist issues (Southard, 2008). Southard (2008) examines some of the ways that Sex and the City participates in the ongoing feminist project and how the show situates
itself within certain key feminist struggles, including the struggle between the individual and the collective, feminism and femininity, and agency and victimization. Living as a woman today often leads women to embody competing and contradictory feminist identities, and *Sex and the City* explores and examines these complexities, embodying them in the show’s four main characters (Southard, 2008). Embodying different female identities and expressing and exploring the ways it can be both difficult and rewarding to exist in a woman’s body in a patriarchal world, writes Southard (2008), might be one of the reasons viewers identify with the show’s characters so strongly. Media critic John Fiske (1986) has written that a television show’s popularity can be credited to the viewers’ ability to identify with the show’s characters, to find similarities to their own social relations and identities. Southard (2008) believes that *Sex and the City*’s popularity can be attributed to its ability “to play out multiple meanings, particularly as they relate to the feminist struggle” (p.150). This ability of viewers to relate to and identify with the show’s characters can help make women viewers feel both sexually empowered and interconnected.

Some feminists believe that *Sex and the City*’s existence is, in itself, sexually liberating, or that the show has ‘liberatory potential’ (Southard, 2008, p. 151; Gerhard, 2005; Levy, 2005; Brasfield, 2006). In a television interview in 2001, sex therapists Jennifer Berman and Laura Berman praised *Sex and the City* with helping women to take control of their sexualities and to feel more empowered about their bodies (Ross, 2001). Researchers like Jane Gerhard (2005) have suggested that the *Sex and the City* characters’ explicit discussions of sex, of enjoying sex and getting pleasure from sex, allows the characters to become the subjects of heterosexual sex rather than the objects of it, the role women are more often forced to play on television. Gerhard (2005) believes the show demonstrates how women, represented by the main characters, are now enjoying the effects of post 1970s gender equality campaigns, even if the feminist project has not been completely ‘achieved’.
Many viewers would likely agree that *Sex and the City* is a television series that finally gave women a strong and powerful voice and showed their ability to take control of their sexual lives (Southard, 2008; Gerhard, 2005; Levy, 2005). The show has been credited with “propelling public discussions around female sexuality and liberation into the new millennium” and with presenting women as knowing and active sexual subjects (Comella, 2003, p. 110; Gill, 2003). It has also been called ground-breaking in its depiction and discussion of female sexuality and for how it “challenges commonly held cultural beliefs about what constitutes appropriate sexual desires and behaviours for women” (Markle, 2008, p. 45–46).

Regardless of whether shows like *Sex and the City* are sexually liberating for women, or patriarchal and oppressive, it is important to note that television shows and other media do influence women. *Sex and the City*, for example, apparently inspired many women to walk into sex toy stores in New York City after the famous “vibrator episode” so that they could buy, possibly for the first time, the vibrator they saw on the show (Comella, 2003). I was not surprised that some of the women I interviewed cited *Sex and the City* as one of the places they learned about and got advice on love, sex and romance. It is important to note that this sort of popular culture would be familiar to women in my study, as well as to millions of other young women, and that there is currently a gap in the research on how popular culture influences young women in terms of their understandings of, or decisions related to, love, sex, and romance.

But, as I argued earlier, despite its “modern,” “liberated” representation of female sexuality, *Sex and the City* did not completely break with romantic discourses that tie sex to love. At the end of the series, Carrie and her three friends are all involved in committed heterosexual romantic relationships and are happy to have found ‘true love’ even though, throughout the series, they had often been trying to date non-monogamously. Even the post-finale *Sex and the City* movies are all about long term relationships and problems that can arise within the context of
true love’. Even though many parents or other viewers might initially see shows like *Sex and the City* as being more about casual sex or friends-with-benefits hook-ups, this is not the whole story. And as the young women I spoke with demonstrated, which I will make clear in chapter five, it seems that the underlying message in shows like *Sex and the City* about trying to find true love and long term commitment resonates with some young women. All of the girls I spoke with cited love as one of the reasons they had sex for the first time, and some of them even went so far as to tell me that love was a requirement for them in any sexual relationship.

It is not only television shows that are promoting the idea of true love, or of waiting for love before having sex; the lyrics of *Teenage Dream*, a popular song in October of 2010 by pop star Katy Perry, say “Let’s go all the way tonight, no regrets, just love” suggesting that it is ok to have sex if you are in love. Lyrics to pop sensation Lady Gaga’s hit song *Bad Romance* are about love and sex, “You know that I want you, and you know that I need you, I want it bad... I want your love” while pop star Rihanna’s song *Love the way you lie* feature the lyrics “that’s alright because I like the way it hurts, just gonna stand there and hear me cry, but that’s alright because I love the way you lie” which came out after her highly publicized experience with domestic violence and assault but which still feature themes of love and romance within the lyrics. These media examples worry parents into believing that their teenage daughters are going to be having casual sex when in reality some of these lyrics, like Katy Perry’s, legitimize sex because it is occurring within the context of a loving romantic relationship rather than outside of one, which is important to note as it relates to the main finding of my project, that the young women I spoke to feel that sex is more an expression of love and a deeper connection of intimacy than it is about empowerment or casual hook-ups. There is currently a lack of literature on the relationship between young women and role media might have in influencing their feelings towards love and
sex. This project attempts to begin to fill that gap, and I hope more researchers will begin working on this area in the future.

Girls encounter heterosexual romantic discourses in television sitcoms, Hollywood romantic comedies, advertising billboards, television commercials, coverage of celebrity relationships in tabloid press, teen magazines, romance novels, and in hallway gossip at school. These dominant discourses are part of the context out of which girls construct their sexual selves. Deborah Tolman (2002) has suggested that “we have effectively desexualized girls’ sexuality, substituting the desire for relationship and emotional connection for sexual feelings in their bodies” (p. 5). The discourses available to young women are often more about ‘becoming closer’ to their partner or taking their relationship to the ‘next level’ rather than about pleasure or desire. Tolman’s argument that we, as a society, place no importance on desire in girls’ sexual experiences and all the importance on emotional connections supports my argument and might be one of the reasons none of the young women I spoke with prioritized or highly valued their own pleasure or desire. Ironically the language of relationships can add to the pressures young women feel to have sex. If penetrative intercourse is ‘going all the way’ then those girls who have not done ‘it’ have not yet gone ‘all the way’ into their relationship.

Though the women in this study are influenced by discourses on romantic love and sex more than they appear to be influenced by discourses of empowerment or casual hooking-up, we still see the regular appearance of moral panics over young women and sexuality which seem to have a main goal of frightening parents, and teachers.

**Moral panics over girls’ sexuality**

Over the past couple of decades, there have been moral panics over sexuality in newspapers, in magazines, and on television. Moral panics over adolescent sexuality are nothing
new, and researchers have pointed out that there are many moral panics about sex (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). A moral panic focuses on a group of people who engage in, or are said to engage in, unacceptable immoral behaviour that is presumed to lead to harmful consequences and therefore threaten the overall society (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). In a moral panic, the reaction to that group of people (by the media, parents, professionals in the field, etc) is out of proportion to the actual threat that they, or their actions, hold (Adams, 1997). There is a long history of moral panics over the alleged harmful effects of exposure to popular culture and media, especially when it comes to young people and sexuality (Cohen, 1972; Thompson, 1998).

The sexual permissiveness of the 1960s was believed to have a negative impact on traditional family values and these beliefs seem to have been extended to the present day where sexual permissiveness on television, in advertising and in other public venues is often blamed for the different sexual ‘epidemics’ in North America (Thompson, 1998). Researchers have recently written about moral panics over teen pregnancy, sex work and trafficking, abortion, hook-ups and ‘friends with benefits’, and oral sex amongst teens (Weitzer, 2005; Joffe, 2005; Doan & Williams, 2008; Dailard, 2006; Flanagan, 2006; Remez, 2000; Yabroff, 2008; Hunt & Curtis, 2006; Curtis & Hunt, 2007). It seems that when evidence that young women may not be completely innocent surfaces, a moral panic tends to appear and to characterize the discourse surrounding female sexuality (Doan & Williams, 2008). Moral panics are socially constructed which is one of the reasons certain activities, especially those of a sexual nature, have acquired such different meanings over time and place (Beall & Sternberg, 1995).

Apparent changes in the sexual behaviour of girls have been the subject of much media attention over the past decade. One particular example of this has focused on oral sex and has led to the idea that there is a teenage oral-sex craze which has in turn stimulated a moral panic around oral sex and adolescents (Flanagan, 2006; Curtis & Hunt, 2007, Wilson, 2004). Writers have
asked questions like, “How exactly, in the course of thirty years... did we go from a middle-class teenage girl... who will have sex only if it’s with her boyfriend, and only if her pleasure is equal to his, to a middle-class teenage girl... who wants to kneel down and service a series of boys?” (Flanagan, 2006, p. 173). Oral sex has not always caused such a panic and I do not think it should warrant such attention right now either.

During the twentieth century oral sex had become a normalized part of everyday heterosexual life within the privacy of a relationship (Hunt & Curtis, 2006). As the century drew to a close, and now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, oral sex has become controversial and problematized (Flanagan, 2006; Remez, 2000; Wilson, 2004; Hunt & Curtis, 2006; Curtis & Hunt, 2007). Though somewhat normalized within adult heterosexual relationships, oral sex amongst heterosexual youth has become a source of considerable anxiety for many people (Hunt & Curtis, 2006; Wilson, 2004; Flanagan, 2006). There have been rumours of ‘rainbow parties’ where girls each wear a different colour of lipstick and perform oral sex on a number of boys. Afterwards the boys’ penises will bear the colours of the rainbow (Flanagan, 2006; Hunt & Curtis, 2006; Curtis & Hunt, 2007). There have also been rumours of girls wearing coloured bracelets where each colour symbolizes their preferred sexual practice, of school principals speaking of the crisis of oral sex in the school yard, of ‘train parties’ where girls work their ways down a row of boys, and of bar mitzvah dinner dances where the girls service the boys on the bus from the temple to the reception hall (Flanagan, 2006; Hunt & Curtis, 2006; Wilson, 2004).

Moral panics over teenage sexuality are especially relevant to my project as we are living (unjustifiably I believe) with these fears right now. Young women have access to the newspaper articles and television shows that warn of the different sexual epidemics. They have grown up receiving contradictory messages in the media about how to approach their own sexualities. Their
parents have likely read about these ‘rainbow’ and ‘train’ parties and feared for their daughters’ sexualities. My project may help some parents to rest more easily; none of the young women I spoke with participated in such parties nor did they participate in casual ‘hook-ups’ when they were younger. The girls I spoke with said that they were looking for love and intimacy in their sexual encounters. They said that love was not only important in some of their sexual relationships, but required. These findings are important to note in the face of current moral panics about teen girls’ sexualities as it is clear that not all girls (or maybe even not any girls) are participating in these activities, and that moral panics might simply be just that – out of proportion to the actual threat different activities hold.

**Sexual Health Education**

When I asked the young women I spoke with about their experiences with sexual education I was not surprised to hear them tell me that most of them had had very little ‘education’. Rachel told me that her education was based on teaching abstinence; she went to a Catholic high school. Sarah did not remember any sex-ed at all. Bonnie told me she thinks she had some ‘bare bones’ minimalist education while Alex only remembers learning about body parts – no contraception or anything to do with actual sexuality. Krissy remembered learning the basics of female reproduction in elementary school as did Mary who only remembered learning about reproductive anatomy.

Sexual health education is not standardized provincially or nationally. It does not discuss topics such as the sexual double standard, the stigma associated with STIs, or the love, emotion, and heartbreak that can be a part of romantic relationships. Some sex researchers have suggested that those working with adolescents need to consider the role romantic experiences play in different aspects of development (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Sex education, for example, may
benefit from the inclusion of information about the role relationships and emotions play in sexual behaviour rather than focusing on sexual anatomy or contraceptive options. I would add that we also need to start treating young people as adults when they ask adult questions. Feminist adolescence researcher Nancy Lesko (2001) has argued that our culture maintains ‘socially young’ adolescents and feigns shock when we find out they have their own sexualities. Lesko (2001) argued that “our marginalization of school-aged mothers is emblematic of our denial of sexuality among youth and our ambivalence about sex education in schools” (p.136).

Feminist theorist and developmental psychologist Deborah Tolman (2002) has argued, in her book *Dilemmas of Desire*, that society gives girls today “a choice between their sexual feelings and their safety” making it very difficult for them to express their sexual agency and find pleasure or enjoyment in sex (p.44). And since sexual health education does not generally cover feelings and emotions, it seems logical that most girls will be more informed on safer sex options than on pleasure or emotions related to sex (though their decisions to put this information to practice seems, at times, less logical). Sex researcher Judith Levine (2002) argued in her book, *Harmful to Minors: The perils of protecting children from sex*, that efforts to protect children from sex ultimately do them more harm than good. She believed that young people can be safe and enjoy safe(r) sexual experiences while still, and also, experiencing pleasure and desire. It seems as though girls should not have to make a choice but should be able to choose to be both safe and to enjoy pleasure. Sex education currently avoids discussions of pleasure and desire, so the focus moves to safer sex practices (or abstinence) reinforcing this requirement for young people to chose one or the other rather than experience both.

The young women I spoke with made it clear to me that sex education was missing the mark in all of their experiences. Not one of them remembers learning about more than simple anatomy or the female reproductive system. In hopes of offering information that will help
contextualize their transcript material in chapter five, I believe it is important to be aware of the sexual health education, or lack thereof, that the young women I spoke to received and to understand that sex-ed was probably not an important factor in their ideas about or decisions to engage in love and sex.

**Conclusion**

Young women today encounter competing discourses about sexuality and gender roles in popular culture, especially television shows, music lyrics, movies and other forms of popular culture. They face a society that still promotes a sexual double standard and that has impossible expectations of young women, for instance, that they be both innocent and seductive. Young women are still not treated as equal to their male counterparts. In the media we see more moral panics about female as opposed to male adolescent sexuality, and more cultural fascination with the sexuality of teenage girls as compared to the sexuality of boys. Oral sex panics over the past decade have focused on girls ‘servicing’ boys, suggesting that either boys are not returning the favour or, if they are, that their participation is not as problematic. These moral panics reinforce both gender roles and the sexual double standard (Flanagan, 2006).

The six young women I spoke with all told me that they believed the media had influenced their perceptions of love and romance. Some of them were specific: Mary and Sarah cited *Sex and the City* as having influenced their beliefs and understandings while Rachel, Bonnie and Mary told me that they thought Disney had influenced their romantic ideals and dreams, findings I will discuss more in depth in chapter five. Love and romance were important to the young women’s decisions to have sex, especially for their first time, while third wave feminist discourses of empowerment or the pleasure available from hooking-up was not important or influential on any of the six young women’s decisions to have sex for the first time.
In the next chapter I will further contextualize my interview transcripts by examining and reviewing the relevant literature related to my project. I will attempt to set the stage for my later analysis of the interview transcripts.
Chapter 3

Literature Review

In order to compliment the cultural context I provided in the previous chapter, this chapter examines the literature on young women and love and first sex, which helps to situate my project. In order to support my argument that some young women today still desire love, romance and long term commitment in their sexual relationships rather than just looking for the empowerment some young women might believe they can find through casual hook-ups, I will examine literature on love, first sex and ‘virginity loss’. I will briefly examine the literature on heartbreak and on trading sex for love. Finally, I will look at how love can influence safe(r) sex decisions and how the sexual double standard is very much alive and relevant today.

Although there is an abundance of research on young women and sexuality, and on young women and love, there is far less literature on the influence love has on young women’s decisions to have sex, especially for their ‘first time.’ This project is my attempt to add to the literature in the hopes that future researchers will continue to ask, how does love influence young women’s decisions to have sex for the first time.

What is Love?

Love does not have a universal definition. Some researchers have tried to offer taxonomies of love, listing different love styles and types, but a common conceptual vocabulary of love does not exist (Rubin, 1988; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1993; Sternberg, 1986; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Aron & Westbay, 1996; Fisher, 2006). Some research on love has focussed on differentiating between types of love, mainly between passionate, romantic, and companionate love (Landis & O’Shea, 2000; Cramer, 1992; Fisher, 2006). Passionate love has often been
defined as a longing for union with another and is said to include certain subjective feelings, expressions, actions, and behaviours but not everyone researching passionate love would agree, because there are currently no absolute standards when it comes to definitions of different types of love (Landis & O’Shea, 2000). For the purposes of my research project I am going to agree with the researchers who have said that love is an intense and complex emotion that cannot be defined: “Love has too many meanings and nuances, too many avenues of defeat, and is too abstract for us to focus upon it at length” (Levine, 2005, p.150). Researchers seem to agree that it is “difficult, if not impossible, to answer the question: ‘what is love?’” (Beall & Sternberg, 1995, p.417; Landis & O’Shea, 2000). They suggest that love is socially constructed and so both the emotional experience and definition of love are contextually and culturally bound. Even the nature of passionate love across cultures has been found to be more complex than researchers initially thought it might be (Beall & Sternberg, 1995; Landis & O’Shea, 2000).

There has not been much research done on the social construction of love, and even less on how love might be socially constructed by young women. Sex researcher Paul Johnson has suggested that loving is performed “through a socially mediated set of beliefs and practices that reproduce a particular set of conditions – the conditions of heterosexuality” (Johnson, 2005, p.1). He argues that romance is a highly scripted practice based on a historically specific set of ideas, experiences and actions. The idea that love is socially constructed has many important implications for my project. If love is socially constructed it likely influences girls differently than boys, as social constructs in sexuality are often gendered. If love is gendered then it will influence the women I spoke with differently than it might have influenced the young men they had intercourse with. This becomes apparent in chapter five when the women tell me about the differences they perceive in the ways that women show their love as compared to men. Love as socially constructed is also important to my project because media can play an important role in
the social construction of gender, sexuality, beauty norms, and other sexuality topics (Lorber, 1994; Plummer, 2002). Gender plays an important role in how people experience and define love. According to Judith Levine, love “seems even more relevant to women’s sexual functioning than it is to men’s […] Women’s sexuality is now understood to be contextually sensitive” which could be one of the reasons that women, more than men, tend to want to relate love and sex (Levine, 2005, p. 143).

I hope my project might add to the discussions of the social construction of love and the role it might play in young women’s decisions to have sex for the first time and help fill the gap in how social constructions of love, especially influenced by the media, might impact young women’s decisions to have sex for the first time.

**First sex and ‘virginity loss’**

Most people have some form of sex, at some point in their life. All six of the young women I spoke with had had sex; having experienced consensual heterosexual intercourse influenced by a romantic relationship was a requirement for participating in this project. This section will examine some of the research and statistics about first sex. I will also briefly discuss the language commonly used to refer to first sex, focusing my discussion on what virginity ‘loss’ can mean.

Many heterosexual young people have their first experience of sexual intercourse while they are in high school. The Public Health Agency of Canada stated, in their 2006 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) survey, that 22% of students in grades 9 and 10 report having had first sexual intercourse (Boyce, King & Roche, 2008). They found that of those young people surveyed in Canada, 17% of boys and 19% of girls report having had first sex when they were between 13 and 15 years of age. The researchers determined that the proportion of
students in those age groups who have had sexual intercourse has not changed since their 2002 study (Boyce, King & Roche, 2008). Approximately 200 schools from all provinces and territories in Canada took part in the HBSC survey with 9,670 students (aged 11 to 15) participating nationally (Boyce, King & Roche, 2008). This survey is an excellent example of much current research on first sex: large scale quantitative surveys that measure average age of first sex and related statistics. The HBSC study was started in 1982; today it is run by the World Health Organization (WHO) and 41 research teams from across North America and Europe participate in the continuing research project.

Other statistical projects have compared sexual behaviours across countries, especially between the United States and Canada. Statistics suggest that the U.S. has the younger sexually active population with the average age of first sex being 16.3 years as compared to 16.6 years in Canada. The U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world, though Canada is only marginally behind (Achia, 1998; Snyder, 2006). Approximately 43% of Canadian youth aged 15-19 have had sexual intercourse compared with 46% of young people in the U.S. (Canwest News Service, 2008; Galambos & Tilton-Weaver, 1998; Guttmacher Institute, 2002; Abma et al, 2004). U.S. teens are also more likely than Canadian teens to have sex before the age of 15, and to have more than one partner in a year (Guttmacher Institute, 2002).

Large scale quantitative projects are very useful to epidemiologists who study the prevalence and incidence of disease. Working with sexual health educators, epidemiologists and researchers can help to target different groups based on these statistics, to help educate about, and, ideally, lower the incidence and prevalence of unwanted pregnancies and STIs. I believe that quantitative research can be invaluable in helping to explain different social phenomena and in helping health promotion campaigns target certain demographics. I also believe that quantitative projects are best complimented by qualitative projects: hearing a smaller group of people tell in-
depth and complex stories about their sexual experiences can also be valuable to sexual health educators and researchers. By conducting interviews with six young women I was able to collect comprehensive stories which provide some context for the statistics on young women’s sexual behaviours.

When examining virginity loss it is important to mention the language generally associated with sex, especially first sex. That a young woman ‘loses’ her virginity to a man, as though it is something taken from her that she cannot get back, leads to the problematic language that women can ‘give it up’ or ‘lose it’ only through penile-vaginal sex with a man. This is problematic in that non-heterosexual first sex – whether penetrative or not – comes to be understood and looked at as a less significant life event than heterosexual first intercourse. Non heterosexual sex comes to be understood as both less important, and less dangerous, because it is not “real sex.” This language is also problematic in that it perpetuates gender inequalities and gender norms that women are to give and men are to take. As women are understood to lose something, and men are understood to ‘take’ something and gain a ‘notch on their belt’ is problematic to attempts to create gender equality. Since sex has often been a site of inequality between men and women, the continued use and existence of this language is only perpetuating patriarchy and men’s physical and psychological power over women and women’s bodies.

This language is also problematic because it lends itself to the idea that virginity is ‘given’ by a woman, and can only be given once, so when a young woman has sex she is perceived as having lost something irreplaceable and thereby as having undermined herself as a valuable or worthwhile person more generally (Doan & Williams, 2008, p.158). Young women have said that they feel as if they have lost something through the experience, be it their “youthful innocence, a private part of themselves, or a coveted bargaining chip” (Bouris, 1993, p. 17). This becomes even more problematic as the vast majority of teens refer to virginity ‘loss’ in this
manner (Doan & Williams, 2008). That women are perceived to ‘lose’ their virginal bodies both physically in terms of their hymen and emotionally in terms of their innocence is exemplified in the literature surrounding virginity ‘loss’ and is made all the more obvious when looking at studies of young men’s experiences of first sex which, though these studies are scarce, do not tend to use language like ‘losing’ or ‘giving up’ something of value (Carpenter, 2001, 2005, 2009). Quite the opposite is the case. Even though boys can be said to ‘lose their virginity’, young men are often seen to gain something, like their ‘manhood’, and the popular discourses around their sexual ‘conquests’ include words like ‘taking’, ‘stealing’, or ‘winning’ something important, so that ‘virginity loss’ for boys is often understood in a much different way than it is for girls (Carpenter, 2001, 2005).

In an example of qualitative work, Laura Carpenter (2001, 2005, 2009), a sex researcher interested in virginity loss, interviewed 33 women and 28 men, aged 18-35, for a project that led to her book, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (2005). Carpenter is one of only a few researchers who have conducted qualitative projects in order to hear more detailed and nuanced stories about love, sex, and virginity loss. Carpenter suggests that those who view virginity as a natural step – rather than as a gift or a stigma – are more realistic about sex and end up being the most satisfied with their first sexual experiences. They are most likely to plan their first sex and to use condoms or birth control, and they are more likely to successfully move on from a bad first experience (Carpenter, 2005). In 2001 Carpenter found that her participants could only agree on virginity loss happening through first penile-vaginal intercourse, although many participants indicated that other kinds of sex could “sometimes” result in virginity loss (p. 127). This majority-rules agreement that penile-vaginal penetration results in virginity loss exemplifies the heteronormative attitudes that many people consciously or unconsciously uphold.
By continuing to use the term ‘losing your virginity’ in the context of women’s first sexual experiences we are perpetuating the belief that important sex equals penile-vaginal penetrative intercourse and that girls ‘lose’ something and boys ‘take’ something. This asymmetry has important implications for those studying first sex. The perpetuation of gender inequalities, especially through the gendered language used to describe sexuality – powerful language like ‘taken’ to describe boys and helpless or passive language like ‘lost’ to describe girls – reinforces gender inequalities. Researchers and educators need to be aware of the importance of this language in order to avoid using it, or to at least expose it for what it is. If sex educators talk about this language and the social construction of virginity loss for girls, as compared to boys, it might be possible to work towards changing this language. By shedding light on the dominant discourses that are influenced by popular culture we might be able to prevent use of this language in the future. Changing the ways that we talk about first sex might end up being crucial to providing girls with the most relevant information that will help them to make informed decisions. Carpenter’s (2001, 205) research demonstrated that if girls view virginity as a natural step then they are more realistic about sex and end up having the most satisfaction and positive outcomes from their first sexual experiences as compared with girls who view their virginity as something to trade or as a stigma they need to get rid of.

**Love and First Sex**

Love, sex and interpersonal relationships are popular topics of conversation. In September 2010 many media outlets and producers of popular culture seemed to be fascinated with the idea of virginity loss. During the week of September 27th, 2010, for example, two new Hollywood films came out in theatres, both of which focussed on virginity loss in high school. *Easy A* and *Virginity Hit* were both comedies about high school boys trying to lose their virginity.
before they leave high school. Their plotlines are similar to those of other popular films from the last decade, like the American Pie series or The 40-year-old Virgin. None of these films take seriously young women’s experiences of virginity loss, or the influence this experience can have on teens as they grow older.

Surprisingly, few studies have looked at the emotional aspects of virginity loss. Studies that have looked at young women’s first intercourse experiences have more often focused on ‘risk factors’ or on negative outcomes of sex like STIs, HIV, or pregnancy rather than looking at the subjective experiences of first sex or the role that love plays in first sex (Solin, 1996, p.93; Boyce et al, 2006; Boyce, Gallupe, & Fergus, 2008; Coker et al, 1994; Laflin, Wang, & Barry, 2008; Languille & Curtins, 2002; Santelli et al, 2004; Beadnell et al, 2005). The small number of studies that have looked at the relationship between love and first heterosexual intercourse have found that the subject is charged with emotions and that love is one of numerous motives behind young women’s decisions to engage in intercourse (Beall & Sternberg, 1995; Schafer, 2008; Tsui & Nicoladis, 2004; Carpenter, 2001, 2005). In research conducted with 32 young women who were interviewed about virginity loss and abstinence in sex education, Alesha Doan and Jean Williams (2008) showed that about 90% of participants decided to engage in sexual activity as a response to their feelings, and to the level of trust and love they had in their partners.

Reginald Bibby, a sociologist at the University of Lethbridge who oversaw Project Teen Canada¹, found that teens today place great importance on romance, loyalty, and love (in Gillis, 2009). While 40% of his 4,000 survey participants approved of premarital sex when the partners ‘liked’ each other, 90% of his respondents accepted premarital sex if the partners really ‘loved’ one another and 70% said they not only accepted such relationships but approved of them (Gillis, 2009).

¹ Project Teen Canada is a set of national surveys that was carried out by Dr. Reginald W. Bibby and included four youth surveys carried out in 1984, 1992, 2000, and 2008. It also included seven adult surveys conducted every five years from 1975 through to 2005. 4,000 15-19 year olds across the country participated in the 2008 survey.
2009). It seems that love is more important than marriage when it comes to first sex for some teens and that for many teens, love legitimizes sex in a way that simply ‘liking’ does not.

In a 2006 study of more than 10,000 Canadian youth, researchers found that 49% of female grade nine students and 60% of female grade eleven students who had already engaged in intercourse cited “love for the person” as the reason they first engaged in sexual intercourse (Boyce et al, 2006, p.63). William Boyce and colleagues found that females were more likely than males to choose “love for the person” (60% versus 39% respectively) as a reason to have sex. Males were more likely to choose “curiosity/ experimentation” than females were (23% versus 12% respectively) (Boyce et al, 2006, p. 63). This large scale study of Canadian youth supports other literature that suggests that girls are more likely (than boys) to have sex when they believe that they are ‘in love’.

Sexuality researcher Karen Bouris (1993) interviewed 150 women about their first experiences with sex in order to help educate parents, and teenage girls about virginity loss and other sexual realities teenage girls face. Bouris (1993) found that women who reported a positive experience of first sex almost always reported that an emotional connection, love, and trust were involved, which led to sexual pleasure and an enjoyment of sex. Interviewing women from many generations, Bouris (1993) found that the stories she was told often demonstrated the breakdown of old rules (virginity until marriage) and the resulting confusion and conflicting pressures both to have and not to have sex. Many of the women she spoke with were happy they had waited for love to have sex, while others had less positive experiences when they had sex without being in love and spoke of disassociating sex from any feelings because their first experiences were lacking love and intimacy (Bouris, 1993).

Researchers Lily Tsui and Elena Nicoladis (2004) interviewed 358 Canadian students between the ages of 17 and 38 about their first experiences with sex. They found that women
waited longer than men to have sex for the first time in a relationship (8.14 months for women compared to 5.74 months for men), and that 85% of women had sex for the first time within the space of a romantic relationship. When the decision to have sex was not mutual, their research suggested that men were significantly more likely to have been the initiators of intercourse than women (Tsui & Nicoladis, 2004).

In 2005, Paul Johnson published Love, Heterosexuality and Society, his empirical study of the ways in which intimate and romantic love are constructed, practiced and regulated through heterosexual sexuality. Johnson interviewed 24 heterosexual men and women about their experiences with love and heterosexuality. Johnson wrote, “love has a normative force in regulating, authorizing and proscribing types of heterosexual sexual practices” (p. 49). He argued that “normative ideals of love still exert a considerable force over sex” (p. 49). Johnson examined the popular idea that sexual intimacy is a practice of love, that is, that sex is something one does with someone that one loves (p. 50). He suggested that negotiating a balance between love and sex can get confusing and asked, “Does sex verify love or vice versa?” (p. 54). Johnson (2005) has argued that love legitimates sex because love is felt to be natural, and sex is seen by many people in our culture to be a natural expression of love. He argues that “because love and (hetero)sexuality are normatively inscribed together... we can understand them through each other” and that sexuality is always framed by wider ontological issues of biological sex and gender (Johnson, 2005, p. 2). Johnson argues that for some women, casual sex and one-night-stands are actually less about ‘pure sex’ and more about love; one of his participants told him that one-night-stands made her feel “beautiful and gorgeous and loved. That’s why you have one-night-stands I suppose, to feel a bit of love I suppose, if there’s nobody around” (p. 60). This idea that even casual sex might be used to feel love or find love has important implications for my own project, and important implications for young women today. Even with the feminist
‘empowerment’ discourses that are popular today, like those from *Sex and the City* that suggest women can have fun, pleasurable, casual sex, some women having casual sex may still be using sex to find love. Though I understand that looking for love and looking for sexual pleasure do not have to be mutually exclusive, and that there are (hopefully) some women who still have sex for fun, not one of the women I spoke with told me that she had been looking for pleasure in her first sexual relationship; all six women had been looking for love and did not even discuss pleasure.

The research I have discussed here suggests that despite many competing discourses and messages that challenge dominant cultural norms of love and romance, girls, especially, still have access to and are influenced by discourses that encourage them to ‘wait for love’ to have sex for the first time, and to want and idealize the idea of ‘happily ever after’ romantic heterosexual love. This is often influenced by the sexual double standard, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

**Love and Heartbreak in First Sex**

Women today encounter many competing narratives in popular culture that suggest that women can become sexually independent and take control of themselves through taking control of their sexual selves and sexual pleasures. Yet women are also inundated with messages suggesting that they should wait for true love before engaging in heterosexual intercourse. Katy Perry’s song lyrics, for example, that going ‘all the way’ is ok if there is love, are an example of the kind of message that many girls learn. This contradiction is important to my study as these contradictory messages can make it difficult for young women to navigate their own desires and to interpret their own virginity. In her studies of ‘virginity loss’, Laura Carpenter (2001, 2005) has suggested that young women offer three main interpretations of virginity; it is a gift, a stigma, or part of a process. Young women who viewed virginity as a ‘gift’ were more likely to require the presence of ‘love’ and to wait for the ‘right person’ before wanting to experience first sex.
than were those who viewed virginity as a stigma or simply as part of the growing up process (Carpenter, 2001, 2005, 2009). This association of virginity with a ‘gift’ has been called a double edged sword for young women and has been associated with abstinence-only programs (Carpenter, 2005). Abstinence-only (or abstinence-only-until-marriage) programs may potentially help protect against some of the negative consequences of sexual activity like STIs or pregnancy, but can also increase “the likelihood of another deleterious consequence, emotional distress due to partner’s nonreciprocation [of love]” (Carpenter, 2001, p. 135). If a young woman views her own loss of virginity as a gift for her male partner, she might imagine that her gift must be reciprocated with a similarly valuable gift of love and long term commitment. If a young man does not reciprocate, it can lead to emotional distress for the young woman. Carpenter agrees with Thompson (1995) and Tolman (2002) who both suggest that the heartbreak resulting from such situations is one of the most negative possible outcomes of first sex.

In her book Going All The Way (1995), Thompson (1995) argued that the emotional risks of heartbreak are more painful and hurtful in the long term than the physical risks of pregnancy and STIs which are more often the focus of research on adolescent sexuality. Even though popular media like Sex and the City suggest that women are not the only ones to have their hearts broken and that women are now breaking more hearts than ever before (a theme that is beyond the scope of this study), Thompson’s argument remains relevant today. Broken hearts can lead to emotional, social, economic, and psychological difficulties for people of all ages, sexual identities and genders. According to Monroe and colleagues (1999) and Furman and Shaffer (2003), romantic break-ups are the most common trigger for the first episodes of major depressive disorders, which would be likely to affect functioning in most domains of a young person’s life (Monroe et al, 1999; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Depression can lead to less interest in school, which can lead to lower grades, which can lead to poorer post-secondary education or career
prospects (Sbarra, 2006; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Monroe et al, 1999; Field et al, 2009). Depression, in young women especially, can also lead to less interest in social settings and to a decrease in the young woman’s circles of friends and social support in general. It can also result in a decrease in girls’ social popularity which can have serious implications for how she views herself (Gilmartin, 2005; Welsh, Grello & Harper, 2004). Depression can even lead to suicide, and there have been documented cases of young people ending their lives due to heartbreak or unrequited love (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992).

Deborah Tolman (2002) has observed that, for some girls, having sex within the context of a romantic relationship provides a safe place for them, protecting them from social ostracism. When girls lose this safety net, the emotional hurt that can follow a breakup may be due not only to lost love, but also to this lost protection (Tolman, 2002). Some research has suggested that because romantic relationships with men are a major route to self-worth and prestige for some women, the breaking up of these relationships can have a negative impact on young women’s self-esteem and self-worth (Gilmartin, 2005).

While many adults tend to downplay the significance of adolescent relationships or to dismiss them as ‘puppy love,’ some researchers have suggested that they may, in fact, contribute significantly to adolescent development (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). In one of the few studies that examines the potential implications of not taking adolescent relationships seriously, Wyndol Furman and Laura Shaffer (2003) suggest that although parents might want to monitor their adolescents’ relationships because they are concerned about risks like pregnancy or violence, they also need to be a lot more sensitive to the potential significance of the breakup of such relationships. Youthful passion and emotion has an important influence on shaping adolescent decision-making as well as on general mental and physical health (Doan & Williams, 2008; Fisher, 2006; Welsh, Grello & Harper, 2004).
Though heartbreak has not been as important a factor to my project as I had initially imagined it would be, I still believe it is important to be aware of the negative outcomes that can result from heartbreak and to know that, for some girls, heartbreak can be serious. However, none of the women I spoke with suffered unduly; none reported a major depressive episode; and all of them were able to move on from their first break up and attempt to find love again with new partners (with the exception of Rachel, who was still dating her first love when I interviewed her). Knowing the role love plays in women’s decisions to have sex for the first time can also be important to understand as it seems that love also influences decisions about safe(r) sex practices, as I will discuss in the next section.

**Is sex safe(r) without love?**

According to Doan and Williams (2008), adolescents’ decisions to engage in sexual activity are largely based on their emotions, love being the most significant. Young women who said they waited for love before having intercourse for the first time reported both positive and negative outcomes of their first sexual experiences. One of the negative outcomes they reported experiencing was that feelings of love influenced their ability to think carefully about and safely negotiate sex. In her study interviewing eight women ranging in age from their early twenties to mid fifties, feminist researcher Gabriele Schafer (2008) examined women’s experiences of sex in the context of romantic love. The women Schafer (2008) interviewed spoke of the way their feelings of being in love overwhelmed their rationality, especially when it came to their decisions to engage in sex. Some of Sharon Thompson’s (1995) participants said much the same; when one girl, Tracy, had sex for the first time she did not use any birth control claiming the sex was ‘spontaneous’, even though she had been planning it for some time (p. 29). Thompson said that Tracy had “talked a lot about her wish to combine sex and love, but she had not talked at all about
what she thought sex might be like” (p. 28). Thompson suggested that Tracy, like other young women influenced by love, thought so much about love, and of getting love in return for sex, that she forgot to think about the realities of sex, like the possibility of pregnancy or disease.

Feelings of love can influence young women’s sexual negotiation skills. If young women are ‘less rational’ when falling in or being in love, these same young women may more easily engage in sex, and do so ‘unsafely’ due to the difficulty of or lack of desire to participate in safe(r) sex practices (Goldmeier & Richardson, 2005; Warr, 2001). Goldmeier and Richardson (2005) argue that this decrease in rationality has also led to increased instances of un-safe sex. Young women seem to be aware of the most efficient ways to prevent pregnancy, but it seems that emotions can over-ride our educations when it comes to protecting ourselves against STIs, heartbreak, and love. Thompson (1995) has said, and I could not agree more,

Although love makes girls and women more likely to prevent pregnancy, it makes them less wary of sexually transmitted infections, because they commonly assume, as most people do, that love is the best guarantee of safe monogamy. Love, however, no more guarantees that a partner doesn’t have or won’t get a sexually transmitted infection than that he’ll love you back or love you after. It doesn’t guarantee a thing, and the romantic idea that it does is extremely dangerous. In fact, given the extent of the current danger of unprotected sex and the extent to which girls continue to attempt to fuse sex and love in everyday life or at least persuade themselves that they have done so, love may really now be, as so many girls say, their “downfall.” (p. 46)

Two researchers in the U.K, David Goldmeier and Daniel Richardson (2005), have looked at the rates of STIs and compared sexual knowledge and awareness of STIs with sexual behaviour. They determined that there is often a discrepancy between sexual knowledge and sexual behaviour. Goldmeier and Richardson (2005) agree with other researchers that love can be powerful enough to prevent some people from using the knowledge they have about how to prevent STIs. The researchers suggest that romantic love might “overwhelm logical thought processes to cause a deterministic and non-logical response to have sex and thus acquire STIs” (Goldmeier & Richardson, 2005, p. 585). Comparing love to obsessive-compulsive disorders,
Richardson and Goldmeier argue that romantic love, and likely sexual arousal, can prevent people from thinking logically about safe(r) sex. They suggest that, though there may be evolutionary advantages to this theory, in reality romantic love could be one of the factors in the increasing rates of STI acquisition in many parts of the world.

Australian researcher Deborah Warr (2001) has demonstrated that romantic love can negatively prepare many young women for negotiating safety in their sexual relationships. She believes that because romance offers a socially acceptable and desirable narrative of sexual pleasure, young women can often end up failing to use their knowledge to make rational decisions about safe(r) sex. Drawing on sexual health material, Warr (2001) suggested that sexual health promotion and education programs need to take into consideration the implications of romantic love for sexual activity in order to educate young women on love’s potential dangers. Warr (2001) describes her notion of “romantic safe sex” which capitalizes on romance as offering a site to make safe sex promotion meaningful to young women, because romance remains a highly pleasurable ideal for women. There currently exists no comparable literature on boys and irrationality. Warr (2001) suggested that romance poses a problem for those working in health promotion because of the ways in which it countervails notions of risk,

Because safe sex discourse, based on concepts of risk, is in conflict with a preeminent romantic discourse in which sex is figurative for an exchange of self, over and above even the notion of sex as an experience of a mutual exchange of (embodied pleasure). This emphasis on the emotional, rather than the corporeal, relationship has been observed to hinder the identification of risk, because being in love obviates the recognition of the potential of bodily risk through sexually transmissible disease. (p. 242)

Similarly, a 2007 literature review exploring condom use amongst heterosexual young people found that romantic love often confounds young peoples’ assessment of risk and can leave young people, girls especially, less effective in negotiating safe(r) sex practices (East et al, 2007). Leah East and her colleagues (2007) reviewed fourteen years worth of literature on young people, condom use and STIs. They concluded that romantic love involves strong emotions that have a
role in sexual decision making and can lead to reduced personal-health outcomes, like depression or diminished popularity as mentioned previously, during sexual activity. Similar to other researchers’ findings, East and colleagues (2007) believed that young women face particular difficulties in negotiating safer sex practices and are vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections. They suggested that sexual health campaigns need to deliver more accurate messages about safer sex and make young people aware of the confounding risks that romantic love can have on safer sex decision making (East et al, 2007).

Likewise, David Rosenthal, Sandra Gifford and Susan Moore (1998), as well as Maggie Kirkman, David Rosenthal and Anthony Smith (1998), have suggested that women may forfeit safer sex or protective sex because of the possibility that it may pose a threat to the development of love and trust in the romantic relationship. Rosenthal, Gifford and Moore (1998) interviewed 112 young heterosexual women and men in Australia to discover the persuasive construction of sex within the discourses of ‘love’ and ‘romance’. They demonstrated that young people, women especially, sometimes imagine casual sex as a strategy for finding ‘love’. This finding led Rosenthal, Gifford and Moore (1998) to suggest that sexual health campaigns need to understand that ‘safer sex’ as ‘protected sex’ might not be the strategy young people use; young women might actually believe that ‘safer sex’ is ‘unprotected sex’ because this might maximize the possibility that their casual encounter will result in a longer term relationship. Rosenthal, Gifford and Moore suggested that if this is the case, the idea that ‘safer sex’ is ‘protected sex’ is more likely to disrupt young people’s constructions of romance in their casual sexual encounters therefore decreasing the possibility of love as their desired outcome (Rosenthal, Gifford, and Moore, 1998). Kirkman, Rosenthal and Smith (1998) conducted interviews with 57 young people aged 16-18. They found that young women often understand sex within the narrative of romantic love and that the discourses of ‘safer sex’ cannot be reconciled within the romantic narrative.
which often leads to lessened or inconsistent condom use and increased instances of unsafe sex because of the romanticism attached to condom-less sex. If having sex without a condom implies an increased level of trust between the participants then young women might read into this implied trust and believe that there exists a higher level of intimacy, which she might read as love (Kirkman, Rosenthal & Smith, 1998; Rosenthal, Gifford & Moore, 1998).

Lesley Miles (1997) has argued that unequal gender relations make it “particularly difficult for women to initiate or negotiate safer sex practices, because of the negative consequences they incur from men when they do so” (p. 479). Miles wrote that strategies for safer sex might pose a threat to male self-esteem, so that if women do try to implement safer sex practices by carrying condoms they may be stigmatized as an ‘easy lay’. She argues that romance and comments like “if you really love that person,” make it difficult for women to practice safer sex because they are not only exposed to romantic discourses, but expected and socialized to embody romantic discourses (Miles, 1997). These gendered expectations assume that women should not be seen as ‘easy’, and that women should take responsibility for their own sexual safety – assumptions that seem contradictory on the one hand, and impossible to uphold on the other. Gendered norms that make it difficult for women to take their sexual health into their own hands limit women’s agency when it comes to sexual decision making. Men appear to be ‘allowed’ to ask women to be both innocent and seductive, while judging them for being both or either (Miles, 1997; Kirkman, Rosenthal & Smith, 1998; East et al, 2007). Like love, gender is socially constructed and the ways that gender is produced and reproduced perpetuate existing power structures which often means that patriarchal inequality remains dominant.

Research on the relationship between love and safer sex is important to the field of sexuality, especially sexual health education, as it can help inform young people of the risks they might be taking in giving up their ability to negotiate safer sex when they are in love. Love
cannot protect against STIs or pregnancy in the ways that latex or other barrier methods can.

Research on the influence of romantic love on safe(r) sex practices demonstrates that love can indeed lead people to be less rational and safe, and more willing to risk their sexual health in pursuit of their romantic ideals. Falling in love can also lead to another potentially dangerous consequence as some young people, women especially, can end up trading sex in the hopes of gaining love (Thompson, 1995). This can have many implications for sexual health outcomes, as well as lead to possible negative outcomes like heartbreak.

Trading sex for love

When I started out on this project, I had imagined that some of the girls I spoke with would tell me that they traded sex for love. After having talked to six women, however, I learned that only one might have done so, and even she did not ‘trade’ sex in a way that led to heartbreak or other negative consequences. Even though using sex as a currency was not an important finding in my project, other research shows that it can still be a significant factor in some girls’ sexual experiences so I want to briefly discuss the negative implications of trading sex for love (Rodgers, 1996; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Thompson, 1995).

In 1990, feminist researcher Sandra Bartky wrote that there existed a gendered imbalance when it came to emotional support in heterosexual relationships. Bartky (1990) claimed that women give more and receive less in relationships than men do. This emotional imbalance might be one of the reasons that some young women engage in intercourse; they might hope to use sex to find a deeper emotional connection. In 1996 Joseph Rodgers used data from the Adolescent Sexuality study (ADSEX), a project that collected sexual health information from 1405 junior high school students in the U.S., to examine the reasons young people engage in first intercourse. Rodgers (1996) found that the main reason young men and women gave (43% of respondents)
was to get their partners to love them more (p. 98). Among the second highest reasons for female respondents (16%) was the desire to please their partners (Rodgers, 1996, p. 98). In 2003, Wyndol Furman and Laura Shaffer stated that the main reason young people give for why they engaged in intercourse for the first time was the hope that their partners would love them more. Karen Bouris (1993) found that many of the young women she spoke to about their first sex felt uneasy about having allowed themselves to be talked into sex in an effort to be loved. Many of those women felt degraded or confused about the experience and wished that they had not traded sex in their attempt to find love (Bouris, 1993).

Personal narratives about young women’s first sexual experiences make it clear that some young women will and do trade sex for love and are heartbroken when the love fails to last (Schafer, 2008; Malach Pines, 2001; Milnes, 2004; Kirkman, Rosenthal & Smith, 1998; Thompson, 1995). Using sex as currency to buy love comes up not only in Thompson’s (1995) study but is also alluded to in research done by Carpenter (2001, 2005). Carpenter suggests that young women who view their virginity as a gift are concerned with finding partners who would not only appreciate the value of their ‘gift’ but who would also reciprocate with an equally valued gift, like love or commitment (Carpenter, 2001). Some girls who want the gift of their virginity to be reciprocated end up with deceitful boys who promise love to attain their sexual goals (Rosenthal et al, 1998; Kirkman et al, 1998).

Though I did not find that the women I talked with were trading sex for love as I had expected, I believe it is still important to be aware that some women do, and that these trades can leave women heartbroken and regretting their first experience with sex (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Thompson, 1995; Bouris, 1993). Another important factor to be aware of when talking to young women about sexuality is the sexual double standard, which still very much exists despite feminist attempts at achieving sexuality and gender equality.
Sexual double standard

The sexual double standard is generally understood to be the phenomenon in which males are rewarded or praised for their heterosexual experiences while females are negatively judged or stigmatized for the same behaviours (Kreager & Staff, 2009). Researchers Derek Kreager and Jeremy Staff (2009) found evidence of the sexual double standard when their survey results showed “greater numbers of sexual partners are positively correlated with boys’ peer acceptance, but negatively correlated with girls’ peer acceptance” (p. 143). Virginity is often understood and portrayed as something that girls are supposed to cherish and ‘save’ while for boys it is something they are supposed to get rid of as soon as they can. Almost 90% of eighteen to twenty six year olds surveyed believe that a sexual double standard still exists (Bouris, 1993).

When asked, many young women admitted that the double standard is not fair (Doan & Williams, 2008). Young women risk being known as ‘bad girls’ or ‘fallen women’ for engaging in pre-marital sexual activity, so using a narrative of love might help girls negotiate the double standard, perhaps lessening the stigma surrounding early sexual activity (Tolman & Higgins, 1996). Saying that they are ‘in love’ offers girls a rationale that sounds and feels better than the stigmatized alternative – even when young women are acting on their own sexual desires when they decide to engage in sex. By acting upon their own sexual feelings, following their sexual desires and using their sexual subjectivities, young women who have sex can risk losing their eligibility for certain social protections, for instance, their reputation (Tolman, 2002). They risk this less if they engage in sex in the pursuit of or in exchange for love (Tolman, 2002; Thompson, 1995). To some extent being ‘in love’ appears to be understood by friends and parents as well as doctors and nurses as an acceptable reason to have sex. For example, a young woman in a sexual health clinic who claims to have only been with one partner with whom she is in love may be
judged differently than a girl who has had sex with more than one partner and does not claim to have been in love. In order to protect themselves from harsh judgement and to limit the already high stigma attached to STIs and STI testing, young women may proclaim love after realizing that saying ‘but he said he loved me’ or ‘but I thought we were in love’ lessened the stigma and actually increased the sympathy they received.

Feminist writer Naomi Wolf (1997) has argued that even at the end of the 1990s young women were expected to exist in a world where they had to be both sexually available and not sexually in charge of themselves. Karen Bouris (1993) similarly argued that “we are given images of doe-like, innocent virgins, but when we turn the page or switch the channel we see a voluptuous, sensual, experienced woman as the icon of the female sex” (p. 19). The contradiction heterosexual women face to be both inexperienced and seductive at the same time is based on this sexual double standard that is reinforced by the gendered norms that I discussed earlier in this chapter. The pressures on young women to be both inexperienced and seductive can be felt, and potentially exploited, by their boyfriends too. Many boys want to have sex and want to be the one who ‘takes’ their girlfriend’s virginity, and though there is currently a gap in the research in this area, there is no research that suggests the outcomes of these experiences might be negative for boys (this would be an interesting area for future research). In fact, the opposite might actually be true as Bouris (1993) has revealed. Bouris (1993) demonstrated that girls who have their first experience of sexual intercourse within a loving relationship face fewer negative consequences in terms of heartbreak and regrets than girls who have sex outside of a loving relationship. This finding is directly relevant to my project; although all but one of the women I spoke with admitted to having been heartbroken at one point or another, none of their experiences with heartbreak were debilitating and they have all moved on since and dated at least one new partner, suggesting that their experiences of sex within a loving relationship did not lead to negative
outcomes (like a major depressive episode). As I will explain in chapter five, none of them have had any regrets.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to set up my project in relation to the literature that has influenced my work. By examining the research on love and first sex I was able to situate the transcripts of the six young women I interviewed within the broader cultural understanding/practices of love and sex. I find it interesting that sex might be safer in terms of safer sex decision making if the sex is happening outside of the context of love. But it also seems as though love still legitimizes sex for some women, an example of the sexual double standard and contradictory messages that many women live with. Although the women I spoke with were not as influenced by heartbreak, or by trading sex for love, as I had initially thought they might be, I still believe these are important factors that can influence other young women and so are worth mentioning and worth investigating by future researchers. There are currently gaps in the field when it comes to the influences of love (and the media) on young women’s decisions to have sex for the first time, and on the possible negative (or positive) outcomes of these decisions. For the purposes of this project however, love was key to these six young women’s’ decisions to have sex for the first time, as I will discuss in chapter five.
Chapter 4

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology of my study. I begin this chapter by explaining what I did in this project, describing my pilot interviews, explaining how I recruited my participants, and the participant characteristics. I go on to discuss my data collection techniques, my interviews, and how I transcribed and analyzed the interview material. I also address why I chose to use interviews, and the importance of qualitative research, feminist methodology and interviewing in general. I conclude this chapter by discussing some of the tensions in research, in writing up research and in sexuality research. This study was approved by the School of Kinesiology and Health studies and the General Research Ethics Board at Queen’s University (See Appendix I).

My project focuses on six young women’s stories and though I follow common threads of interpretation, I have not generalized from the way these young women talked about love and sex. Instead, I examine the individual stories to begin thinking critically about themes in the women’s experiences and understanding, and to draw out inferences about the cultural context in which these women have come to the understandings that they have. All six young women come from a similar background in terms of their social economic status, age, academic experiences and ethnicities – all were white Canadians in their early twenties enrolled in post-secondary education. The commonalities they share, as well as their differences, add depth and perspective to my analysis allowing me the opportunity to compare six young women whose similar backgrounds have not necessarily led to similar experiences with love, sex and romance.
What did I do?

The question that motivated this study was how do love and romance influence young women’s decisions to have heterosexual intercourse for the first time? To answer this question I asked six young women about their experiences of first heterosexual intercourse. I was interested in allowing young women to share their stories, hoping I would be able to improve the ways I teach sexual health education.

I used an interview guide during my discussions (see Appendix B). The guide was revised after I conducted a series of pilot interviews. Because I conducted semi-structured interviews, I was able to deviate from the guide when it seemed useful to do so.

Pilot interviews

Three friends volunteered to help me conduct pilot interviews. The pilot interviews followed a rough interview guide and allowed me the opportunity to revise and edit the guide in order to make it more relevant to my research questions and the goals of this study. At the end of the pilot interviews I had participants give me feedback on whether they thought any issues were missing from the interview or whether any questions were redundant. I also took the opportunity to ask them what they liked and disliked about the interview so that I could make changes before I started recruiting my participants. Through the pilot interviews I learned that my questions were too vague. Each interviewee mentioned in her feedback that I asked too many similar questions. They felt that they were repeating themselves throughout the interview. I changed my interview guide to reflect this feedback. As a result, my “Interview Guide” became more structured (see Appendix A). I came up with some of the new questions during the pilot interviews by imagining what sort of questions I could ask to elicit thoughtful and elaborate answers. I also adapted some of the questions from Paul Johnson’s (2005) Interview Guide, found in his book Love,
Heterosexuality and Society (see Appendix B). I found his questions to be quite direct and useful to my own project (Johnson, 2005, pp. 139-142).

Paul Johnson’s book Love, Heterosexuality and Society (2005) illustrates the ways romantic love can be longed for, regulated, practiced and constructed through heterosexual sexuality. Johnson describes the social construction of romantic love, specifically heterosexual romantic love and sexuality. Johnson recruited twenty-four heterosexual men and women and used semi-structured interviews made up of 33 questions to collect the data that he analyzed in his book. In creating my own interview guide I used and adapted about half of his questions, copying verbatim some simpler ones such as “How would you define love?” (p. 139), while disregarding questions that focused on class, race, gay and lesbian sexuality and marriage (see Appendix B). As I was interested in finding out about young women’s experiences with love, asking them to define love seemed like a good idea to me, while asking questions about class or the legality of gay marriage were unrelated to my projects goals. I wanted to focus on key questions, letting participants talk in detail about their experiences with love, sex, and romance, although I do acknowledge that race and class do, indeed, influence our ideas about love and sex. Writer Eva Illouz (2006) has argued that “romance continues to be an upper-middle-class way of life because it presupposes a not inconsiderable amount of resources in time and money” (p. 43). This is a particular middle class version of romance and definitions of romance for other people might be different. Although I agree that class is an important consideration, it was not the focus of my project.

Participant recruitment

Six participants were recruited through the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies (SKHS) undergrad listserv via email, as well as through public postings in the SKHS building on
the Queen’s University campus (see Appendix C). Two participants were recruited through the snowball technique: individuals passed on my contact information to their friends who were interested in participating. All participants had to meet my eligibility criteria so they had to be women between 18 and 23 years old, and their first experiences with sexual intercourse needed to be heterosexual, consensual, and influenced by or occurring within a romantic relationship.

All six of the women I spoke with come from upper-middle-class families and are privileged enough to have attended university. I was interested in speaking to female university students not only because I had access to them, but also because I was interested in seeing whether the moral panics about female sexuality that we continue to see in the media would be relevant to them. With access to feminist studies, gender studies, women’s studies and sociology classes and to the range of information available on campus I wondered whether these six women might be more likely to speak of sex as empowering them, or to be a part of casual hooking-up culture. I was surprised to find that the women I spoke with still associated love with sex, even though they had access to other discourses on campus and through the media.

**Participant Characteristics**

All six women were white Canadians from upper middle class families. They all came from cities in Ontario: Toronto, Peterborough, Cornwall, Niagara, Port Perry and Barrie. Two of the women had attended public high schools, three had attended Catholic high schools and one had attended a private high school. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 23 years. The age of first sex ranged from 16 to 19 years. Five of the young women had experienced break-ups and were no longer dating the partners with whom they had their first experience of intercourse. At the time of the interview one of the women was still dating the first person with whom she had had heterosexual intercourse. I met with all participants in person or by phone for an initial
screening meeting (see Appendix F) to describe my study in more detail and to be sure that they met the eligibility criteria. To be eligible to participate the participants needed to be interested in sharing their personal stories about their first experiences of love, romance and sex. Their first experience of sexual intercourse needed to be heterosexual, consensual and occurring within or influenced by a romantic relationship. I sent all interested and eligible participants a personal email with the Letter of Information (see Appendix D) and Consent Form (see Appendix E). During the screening meeting I also asked participants to choose a convenient time and place for their interviews.

**Interviews**

At the beginning of each interview I explained and had participants sign the Letter of Information and the Consent Form. Both forms explained that the participants’ comfort and confidentiality were main priorities in my research project and that the participants would not have to discuss any topics or answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. I should note that no one chose to avoid any questions or topics and that all participants seemed quite enthused and excited to be part of the project.

I gave all the participants information about counselling services available in Kingston (see Appendix G) in case they experienced the interview as emotionally difficult. Although all of the participants in my project experienced consensual first intercourse, there still could have been the chance that a discussion of sensitive personal issues would raise difficult feelings for someone. The extensive training I have completed as a volunteer at the Sexual Health Resource Centre (SHRC) in Kingston helped me to feel confident that I would be able to maintain both a confidential and a non-judgemental environment. I believe that my experience at the SHRC helped me to create a safe space in the interviews.
Participants were informed at the screening meeting, at the beginning of the interview, and again at the end of the interview that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences. They were also informed that, to protect their confidentiality, a pseudonym would be used in their interview transcript and in all reports or publications related to this project. The women were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms; for those who declined, I chose the pseudonym for them.

All of the interviews took place in Kingston, Ontario on the Queen’s University campus in a study room that I booked at Stauffer Library. The interviews lasted from twenty-five to forty-five minutes with the average interview length of thirty-four minutes. Though each interview followed a very similar format with the same interview guide, some of the women I spoke with took more time answering my questions and elaborated on their answers while others spoke more quickly or gave less comprehensive answers. I digitally recorded each interview using a voice recorder and took hand written notes on things like the mood of the interview, the women’s body language, and other factors I thought might be important during the transcription phase.

During the interviews I followed the interview guide but also let the women pursue issues that interested them. If participants brought up tangents or answered questions in ways that led to other questions or relevant topics, then those tangents were followed. Each interview had a comfortable environment – which many of the participants commented on. The interviews ran more smoothly when I interrupted less frequently and shared little of my own personal stories. I did my best to maintain a power neutral interview (Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). I dislike the power dynamics that are so often at play in research with human participants and I am happy that my participants, who had voluntarily and willingly agreed to participate, were ‘excited’ to share their stories. I asked for clarification and elaboration at times and nodded in
understanding at times as well but I never challenged the participants’ perspectives nor did I judge the decisions that they had made regarding their sexual experiences. Based on my training from the SHRC I tried to stay open-minded and positive about all of the experiences the young women shared with me. I also tried to mimic and mirror the women’s own language, especially when they were speaking of issues which could be emotionally important or sensitive. Being mindful of maintaining a positive interview environment I was also careful to avoid making assumptions about what was said or what was left unsaid. I also allowed for flexibility in the interview settings.

At the end of each interview I informed participants that I would be emailing them a copy of their interview transcript (with a password protected file to maintain privacy) so that they could review and approve the transcript to be sure it adequately represented what they had wanted to say.

**Data transcription and analysis**

As I transcribed the interviews, I began the process of coding. The transcription process allowed me exposure to the data for a second time, so I began to take note of my interpretation of the participants’ words. After I transcribed the interviews, and the transcripts were approved by the participants, I re-read them looking for key words as part of my first cycle of coding (Saldana, 2009). I created a simple summary document of all the transcripts in order to be able to more quickly find some of the quotes, themes and codes. I read the transcripts again in their entirety, finding themes based on the key words for my second cycle of coding, and then I re-read them again to make sure that I had not missed anything. Coding is primarily an interpretive act so recoding and rereading helped me to refine, rearrange, and reclassify previously coded data (Saldana, 2009).
As I read through the transcripts I noticed that with each read through I was able to pick up similarities and differences in the ways the women responded to the questions. I created themes and code words to record these similarities and to make note of important differences (see Appendix H). I then organized the transcript data into documents arranged around common themes and threads. For example, I put the definitions of “love” together in order to refer back to them more quickly and I often grouped answers to similar questions together to compare answers. I was able to record emotional responses during the interviews on my notepad and while I was re-reading the transcripts these helped me to remember the nuances, feelings, and emotions of each individual interview. Being able to recall body language and an interviewee’s emotional state helped me in my interpretations.

In analyzing the transcripts, I decided to use a model introduced to me by Johnny Saldana (2009) in his book *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Saldana describes coding as a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative essence-capturing attribute for a portion of data (2009, p. 3). Saldana suggests that descriptive coding, in vivo coding, emotion coding, and values coding are the best types of coding to represent the personal aspect of interview transcripts. In vivo coding refers to actual words or phrases (‘quotes’) found in the interview transcripts; words like ‘love’ and quotes like ‘I had wanted to be in love before losing my virginity’ were useful as they helped give me a starting point. Emotion coding labels the emotions recalled and experienced by the participants or inferred by me about the participants. Values coding is used to reflect the participants’ values, attitudes and beliefs, representing their perspectives and world views (Saldana, 2009). I used the handwritten notes I had taken during the interviews to remind me of the interviews themselves and to help me code them for emotions and values. I used changes in the participants’ voices, tones, and attitudes as the basis of my
emotional coding. This was a key part of the process for me as topics like heartbreak or love may generate feelings which are not necessarily communicated in words.

Like other researchers, I found that my level of personal involvement influenced how I perceived, documented and coded my data (Adler & Adler, 1987; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Bringing my own subjectivity, experiences, and values to the process of conducting my research allowed me to see how much of a judgement call coding can be. In transcribing oral narratives into transcripts, I am, as a researcher, constructing a “second-level narrative based upon, but at the same time reshaping, the first” (Borland, 1991, p. 63). Understanding that coding is such a subjective judgement call allowed me to better understand the importance of my own experiences and to be more aware of myself while I was conducting and writing up my research (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004).

**Interviews, Qualitative Research, and The Importance of Feminist Methodology**

Interviewing was the best method for this project because the one-on-one communication and sharing involved allowed me to explore women’s memories and subjective understandings of complex experiences. Individual interviews may also be the most appropriate way for examining individual biographies (Mays & Pope, 1995). As a volunteer at the Sexual Health Resource Centre (SHRC) in Kingston I have become more and more interested in listening to young women’s voices, especially in my experiences teaching sex education; I have wanted to have more opportunities to engage in conversations with women about their sexual stories. I believe in the value of experience and personal narratives when it comes to understanding sensitive intimate topics like love and sexuality. The interaction and sharing involved in interviews can promote conversation and trust rather than create a power imbalance between researcher and interviewee (Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997).
I have chosen to use a qualitative approach for my research project. Qualitative methods are best for hearing the voices of people who do not often get to tell their stories and for critically investigating experiences about which little is known (Mckague & Verhoef, 2003). I knew I wanted to interview young women about their sexualities and it was a relatively simple decision to choose to work with individual interviews rather than focus groups or group interviews once I started looking at the pros and cons of different research methods. One of the main critiques of the focus group interview is that confidentiality issues can become a problem. Since my project involves material of a sensitive and personal nature, deciding not to use focus groups in favour of individual interviews made the most sense to me as I wanted to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of my participants (Robinson, 1999).

I agree with C. Wright Mills’ sociological idea that people’s life stories bear the imprint of the context in which they grow up and thus, I have not tried to generalize any sort of ‘findings’ from my project across populations or outside of the individuals’ own experiences (Mills, 1959). I am aware that working with interview transcripts requires researchers to not only make judgements while coding data, but also to interpret the data in order to analyze it. Feminist researcher Katherine Borland (1991) has written that as researchers, our responsibility to our sources becomes most acute when we are trying to interpret narratives while staying true to the narrator’s original intentions. Borland asks, “how might we present our work in a way that grants the speaking woman interpretive respect without relinquishing our responsibility to provide our own interpretation of her experience” (p. 64). She suggests that giving narrators copies of their transcribed interviews, before researchers publish or present on the material, can offer participants a sense of authority in preventing misrepresentations of their stories, and can allow misunderstandings to be explained before the final research product is composed (p. 73). By sending copies of their transcribed interviews back to the young women I interviewed and
allowing them the opportunity to edit/ add to/ change the transcriptions I hope to have been able to avoid misrepresenting their stories in the way Borland warns us about.

Researchers like Annie Potts (2002), Sharon Thompson (1995), Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000), and Carolyn Ellis, Christine Kiesinger and Lisa Tillmann-Healy (1997) have all argued for the importance of interviews as a research method. Feminist research practice is the main influence on my research methodology due to its concern with reflexivity, non-exploitative interview relationships, empowerment of the interviewee, and the personal consequences of the research for the interviewee (Robinson, Meah & Hockey, 2007; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994; Cotterill, 1992; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Feminist research attempts to understand women’s experiences of living in a patriarchal world, a world in which women are often subordinate to men. One of the reasons feminist research is useful to my project is that it is not only research about women but it is research for women (Maynard, 1994; Finch, 2004; Robinson, Meah & Hockey, 2007). I am using women’s subjective experiences as a resource that will help me to bring new understanding to the ways that I teach other women; sharing one woman’s story with another woman might be a useful way for female participants to engage more deeply in sex education.

Feminist research is complex: not all researchers agree on what it should look like. British sociologist Liz Stanley (1982) writes that feminist research is absolutely and centrally research by women, while Naomi Black (1989), a Canadian social scientist, writes that feminist research “insists on the value of subjectivity and personal experience” (p. 75). I have chosen to do feminist research because I believe it to be research carried out by people who identify as feminists, who have feminist goals, including that of women’s equality, who ask particular kinds of questions without necessarily searching for ‘truths’, and who draw on women’s experiences of
living in a world in which we are often subordinate to men (p. 4; Wadsworth & Hargreaves, 2001).

In an early contribution to discussions of feminist methods, Ann Oakley (1981) suggested that interviewers needed to become more involved with their interview participants and that interviews needed to include a sensitive, interactive interviewer-interviewee relationship. Oakley was an early advocate for the idea that an interview should be a non-hierarchical setting where all those involved, including the interviewer, are prepared to invest something of their personal selves. In the almost thirty years since Oakley’s work appeared many other feminist researchers have agreed with her and we have seen the creation of different ‘models’ for interviewing.

I have chosen to use a semi-structured interview type for my project. Using the feedback from my pilot interviews, I realized that I needed a more structured interview format that still allowed for free interaction between me, as the interviewer, and the young women I was interviewing. Using a semi-structured type of interview I was able to ask pre-planned questions while still allowing for fluidity and the option to follow up tangents as I saw fit which helped the interviews to flow smoothly (Reinharz, 1992). I wanted to avoid the type of hierarchical interview that Oakley (1981) critiqued. For instance, a type of interviewing known as the “informational extraction model,” uses a standardized set of questions but does not allow interviewers to express their own views or opinions, and requires them to be only friendly enough to obtain the information they desire (Franklin, 1997). One of the problems with this type of interviewing is its rigid nature which leads to detached relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee. This model places a divide between the interviewer and interviewee, upholding the power relations between the two limiting the degree and nature of the interviewer’s participation (Franklin, 1997). As feminists have argued, this model leaves no space for spontaneity of exchange between the interviewee and participant, something that can be important and
illuminating (Franklin, 1997; Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Potts, 2002; Thompson, 1995).

The semi-structured model I have used for my interviews was created by feminist researchers as a response to earlier interviewing methods. Semi-structured interviewing is useful for getting an “in-depth and intimate understanding of people’s experiences with emotionally charged and sensitive topics” which makes it a practical method for discussing sexuality in an interview setting (Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997, p. 121; Black, 1989). This type of interviewing assumes the interviewer and interviewee will both have active roles in the interview: the interviewer contributes to such an extent that they can significantly shape the interview process (Reinharz, 1992; Franklin, 1997; Thompson, 1995; Carpenter, 2005; Bouris, 1993). This allows the interview to flow in a more natural, conversational mode and allows the distinction between ‘researcher’ and ‘subject’ to become somewhat blurred, often creating a setting that promotes shared understandings and empathy among all those involved (Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). In this model the interviewee is referred to as a “participant” in order to lessen the underlying power relations inherent in the language of older methods, an important linguistic change that is meant to allow for a greater degree of respect for the person participating (Briggs, 1986).

**Tensions in Research**

Researching topics that may be of great personal significance make some of the tensions in feminist research all the more apparent. Feminist agendas often involve, “on the one hand… empowering the people we work with by revealing meanings they give to their lives; and on the other hand our political vision of the structural conditions that lead to the choices they made, a vision they themselves may not recognize as valid” (Wasserfall, 1997, p. 153). I see these
tensions as being a very real part of my own project. I want to talk to people and give individual experience a voice, but at the same time I recognize that I need to situate these experiences within the historical and social discourses that shaped them.

Different interviewers produce different interview material. One of the goals of my project is to attempt to adequately explain why the material in my study is as it is and to consider what role my involvement and interpretation plays, as well as how the participants might interpret themselves in my presence. Memory is a key issue when working with participants. People’s memories are never perfect or reliable, and they can change over time, with the acquisition of new knowledge or within different contexts. In my project there is also the risk that the young women changed their stories to reflect upon themselves more positively or to give the sort of information that they might have thought I was looking for. Although this possibility is always a concern, I think it is more likely that they will offer up rehearsed stories, which I discuss later in this chapter, than it is that they will change their stories to reflect on themselves more positively. Since my project is not interested in hearing a certain type of story as much as it is interested in hearing whatever story women are willing to share, it does not necessarily lend itself to more or less favourable ‘answers’ from them which will hopefully lessen the chances of this happening. The fact that women volunteered to participate, makes it more likely that they would share truthful or genuine stories with me.

Tensions also manifest themselves in the way researchers write up their research projects. Laurel Richardson (1990) is aware of the importance of transforming interviews into sociological texts. She asks the important question: ‘how should we write our research?’, reflecting a central postmodernist realization that all knowledge is socially constructed and therefore interpretation of data and the writing up of research is also socially constructed and influenced by the social and historical context of both the writer and the interviewee. Language creates certain versions of
reality and imposes different meanings on people’s experiences. Because we construct narratives and give things beginnings, middles and ends, we lose some of the elaborateness and complexity of the subjective experiences in writing things down. It is hard to represent what we’re trying to achieve, even if we are simply trying to show that there are different interpretations of the same memory or experience.

I tried to be aware of these issues while working on my own project, struggling to allow the women’s words to tell their own stories and to avoid misinterpreting their words or taking them out of context. Being conscious of these tensions in research and writing helped me to stay contextually true to the women’s own words and stories.

**Tensions in Sexuality Research**

Sex researchers face complications that other researchers might not face. Young women in my study might have been less likely to answer sexual questions honestly because of socio-cultural constraints against women having their own sexual subjectivities or the fear of being negatively judged for their sexual experiences. My participants might have been less open to their own self knowledge or less self aware because of the cultural and social norms surrounding sex. It is harder to answer questions if you have not thought them through. I am conscious of the possibility that,

young female interviewees’ difficulties in talking about sex are not simply local communication problems, but reflect the contradictory nature of the social construction of femininity: for instance, the pressure on young women to accommodate to a conception of adult heterosexuality which is inherent to masculinity, whilst simultaneously making sense of themselves and their ‘otherness’. (Robinson, Meah, & Hockey, 2007, p. 185).

This contradictory nature expresses itself in the gender roles young women are expected to embody. Femininity is socially constructed in opposition to ‘masculinity’ and obligates heterosexual women to maintain this ‘otherness’ and to keep the gender roles separated. This is
sometimes exemplified in the sexual double standard where men are often praised for sexual experiences while women are stigmatized (Kreager & Staff, 2009). It is important to understand that difficulties telling stories about their sexual experiences might be due to the fact that women are often worried about being stigmatized and judged about their sexualities (Robinson, Meah & Hockey, 2007).

Being aware of some of the ways that femininity has been socially constructed has been important to me in terms of helping me to create a non-judgemental interview atmosphere; I understand that the young women in my project might have feared being judged by myself, the interviewer (Gilfoyle, Wilson, & Brown, 1993). I addressed this potential communicative barrier by attempting to increase participants’ comfort by making it clear to them that the interview was a non-judgemental, non-assumptive space. I also tried to adopt the interviewees’ own language in terms of sex and sexuality and offered up my own experiences, if it seemed helpful to do so, as a way of providing critical reflections or shared experiences that might have promoted a feeling of trust and comfort.

I have taken the advice of other sexuality researchers and tried to be aware of some important questions and critiques raised about sexuality research, like,

Does the researcher’s adaptation of her sexual terminology reflect sensitivity? How might it direct rather than enable the speaker? How can the data be interpreted as an account of sexual experience? How have participants sought to represent experiences which they found emotionally charged, taboo, or have difficulty translating into words? (Robinson, Meah & Hockey, 2007, p. 181).

In conducting my interviews I was constantly aware of the terminology I was using, and I tried to avoid asking leading questions. When transcribing and interpreting the interviews I took note of the important issues raised by Robinson, Meah and Hockey (2007). They helped me to think more critically about the importance of language and tone of the participants when they were recalling their experiences with sex and love.
There are many limitations on discussions of sex in social settings so it is possible that my interviewees may not have thought previously of ways to express their experiences. However, young women have often rehearsed and shared their sexual and romantic stories so frequently with each other – where this kind of talk is not taboo but normalized – that the opposite of this could also be true. Because girls talk to each other about love and sex and romance, their stories might be structured around dominant discourses. Analysis of these discourses is one of the goals of this project. Dominant discourse can limit or silence competing discourses that might shape girls’ sexual experiences. Sharon Thompson (1995) found that many girls’ stories had “a polished quality that made them seem rehearsed, and in a way they were. These were the stories that teenage girls spend hundreds of hours telling each other, going over and over detail and possibility...” (Thompson, 1995, p. 4). Being aware of these issues, and being mindful that girls’ stories about love, romance, and sexuality are often stories that they tell many times, is important, as there is always the possibility that these rehearsed stories might be hiding or obscuring the complexity and nuance of girls’ own sexual experiences. It is difficult, if not impossible, to minimize the influence of dominant narratives and discourses, and it would be detrimental to this project to try. Part of my task in this project is to make evident how dominant discourses might have influenced the girls I spoke with.

**Conclusion**

Feminist methodology confirmed for me the value of women’s words and stories, and served as a constant reminder that one of the main goals of my project is to use women’s own subjective experiences to teach other women, through sexual health education. Interviewing six young women about their experiences with sex and love allowed me the opportunity to find out the role love played in their first experiences with intercourse. It also allowed me the chance to
get to better understand some of the complicated factors that went into their decisions to have sex for the first time.

In the next chapter I share the six young women’s words, and attempt to contextualize their experiences and better understand how the media might have influenced their decisions to have sex. I look at some of the gendered differences in love, as understood by the six young women. I examine some of the main motivators these girls had for dating, how they prepared for sex, and I briefly examine the small role heartbreak played in some of their experiences.
Chapter 5

Narratives of Love and Sex

Starting out on this project I expected to find that heartbreak would be the most negative outcome of first sex, and that girls today would be so influenced by popular culture and media that they would tell me about having casual sex and hooking-up and calling their experiences empowering. Even though I interviewed young women whose decisions to have sex for the first time had been influenced by a romantic relationship, I still thought that they might tell me that love was less important to them now, or that they had come to find sex to be empowering as they got older. Over the course of my research, and after talking with six young women, I came to see how discourses that link sex with love play out today. All six of the young women I spoke with wanted to wait for love before they had sex for the first time.

In this chapter I examine and analyse the transcript data created from my interviews. I investigate my main research question: How do love and romance influence young women’s decisions to have heterosexual intercourse? I examine sex and love as socially constructed and attempt to contextualize the transcripts, through my interpretations of the six young women’s words, drawing on the literature on young women’s experiences with love and first sex. In order to contextualize, interpret and better understand the six women’s stories, I also use the more general literature in the field of female sexuality.

In this chapter I explore the women’s definitions of love. I look at the gendered differences in love by examining how the women believed that men and women love differently. The women I spoke with saw the media as the main influence on their sexuality. I examine their thoughts on the media and popular culture and consider some of the messages they receive about love, sex, and the gendered sexual double standard that very much exists today. I look at how love
might legitimize sex for women and examine the young women’s words about their experiences of sex within loving and trusting relationships. I look at how love is related to first sex and how love might influence sexual decision making. I discuss what the women told me they believed the point of dating to be, for them, and examine how some of them prepared for their first sexual experiences. I briefly discuss the idea of heartbreak, and how heartbreak was not as big a factor in first sex as I had initially expected it to be. And finally, I discuss the fact that these girls seem to have ‘no regrets’ about their first sexual experiences.

Looking at young women’s expressions of love, romance and first sex in the context of popular culture and media, I am able to understand better why the young women I spoke with are still interested in linking sex to love, despite a social context that gives them other options, including casual hook-ups. I have also come to better understand some of the motivations behind young women’s decisions to engage in first sex. This chapter exhibits the main goal of my project: to give young women a voice. The chapter might also offer reassurance to women, parents, and educators that not all young women are only interested in casual sex, hook-ups, and being friends-with-benefits. Though I do not disapprove of hooking-up or of the casual sex culture, many parents worry about their daughters’ safety so it might be comforting for them to hear that not all women are interested in the casual sex as empowering message some media are promoting. As the women I spoke with demonstrate, some young women today are still interested in love and still want to wait for love to have sex, especially for their first time.

**Main Characters**

The six young women I interviewed all had sex within the context of a consensual heterosexual relationship and all of their decisions to have sex for the first time were based on love and/or romance. All six of them thought they were in love, or would be in love soon, when
they had sex for the first time. When I spoke with them, only Rachel was still dating the boy with whom she had intercourse. All of the girls but Bonnie had experienced heartbreak on at least one occasion and all of the girls but Rachel had had new sexual partners and sexual experiences since their first.

Mary was 23 when I spoke with her. She had attended Catholic high school in rural Ontario and had sex for the first time with her boyfriend of a few weeks when she was 19. Mary was the only woman I spoke with who was in university when she had sex for the first time. She never dated in high school although she did remember having crushes. Mary remembered feeling huge self-imposed pressure to date and to be in a relationship and to find the person she was going to marry when she started university. She started dating a boy in university and told him that she wanted to have sex within a long-term loving relationship but they ended up having sex only a few weeks after they started dating. She was the only girl who admitted that she had feared she might lose her boyfriend if she did not have sex with him. Still, they broke up only a few weeks after having sex for the first time. Mary told me that sex for her seemed very normal, banal, and nothing out of the ordinary. She wondered what all the fuss was about and why sex was often put on a pedestal. Mary was on the birth control pill before she had sex for the first time, but encouraged her boyfriend not to use a condom, telling me that she had wanted to be in love the first time she had sex, and not using a condom seemed to represent love for her. She did not remember her first time being too painful physically, but remembers the pain of the breakup and believes she was heartbroken in a superficial way. Mary was engaged to be married when I spoke to her in 2010.

Sarah was 23 when I spoke with her and she was 17 when she had sex for the first time. She broke up with her boyfriend about a month after they had sex for the first time. She attended an all-girls private high school in an urban centre in Ontario and was the only woman I spoke
with who claimed to have been raised by a feminist (and single-mom) parent. She did not date before she met the boy she would have sex with for the first time and remembers having her first kiss in grade 12. She remembers her first experience with sex as being awful and very painful, but she put up with it and is the only woman I spoke with who explicitly told me that sex is pleasurable, and finally enjoyable, especially as compared to the pain she experienced when she first started having sex. Sarah was not dating anyone when I spoke to her in 2010, telling me that she did not have time for a serious relationship and prioritized her career over her romantic life.

Krissy was 23 when I spoke with her, attended public high school in Ontario and had sex for the first time with her boyfriend when she was 17. Love was the only reason she would consider having sex. She said that her first time was scary but that she wanted to do it because she felt like she was in love and wanted to express it. She was on the pill before she had sex for the first time, but she was more worried that sex would change the relationship than she was about pregnancy or STIs. She worried that her boyfriend might just be in it for sex, and that he wasn’t as committed as she was. Krissy and her boyfriend broke up about two years after they had sex for the first time. Although she was not heartbroken by the breakup, she did think that that first breakup was the hardest because it was her first real connection with someone and she feared she would never find that emotional and physical connection again. Krissy dated a few boys after that, and eventually got married when she was 22 and had been happily married for about a year and a half when I interviewed her in 2010.

Bonnie was 21 when I spoke with her. She had sex for the first time when she was 18, about four months into her relationship, and continued dating the same person for almost two and a half more years. Bonnie went to a public high school in Ontario, though she told me that she was still influenced by a fairly religious family upbringing. She and her boyfriend had not planned to have sex but they did as a result of circumstances and convenience. She had worried
about the pain sex might cause her, but only discussed that with her girl friends and not with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend had already had sex, but she was not worried about STIs. They did not discuss pregnancy prevention until after they had already started having sex. Bonnie told me she was probably heartbroken when they broke up but that she has not felt heartbreak since. Bonnie is looking for a wonderful, unconditional love and told me she does not want to settle for an everyday run-of-the-mill everyone-has-it sort of love.

Rachel was 21 when I spoke with her. She had sex for the first time when she was 18 and she is the only one I interviewed who was still dating the person she shared her first sex with. Rachel grew up in a small Ontario town and attended a Catholic high school in the nearest semi-urban centre. She was just finishing up her undergraduate degree when I spoke with her. She was on birth control pills when she had sex for the first time and also used a condom, afraid of pregnancy and STIs as her partner had already had sex with his last girlfriend. Rachel wanted her first time to be special and to be with someone she loved. She had no regrets about having sex within a loving relationship and believes that too many people have sex for pleasure only, with no real emotional connection. She feels like they are missing out on the love she is experiencing.

Alex was also 21 when I interviewed her. She had sex for the first time when she was 16 years old after dating her boyfriend for about five months. She attended a Catholic high school and after she and her boyfriend broke up they continued dating on and off for the next few years. Alex dated a number of boys before she had sex for the first time. She told me that she was the one who initiated sex. She had wanted to do it for a while but her boyfriend, who had already had sex, had had a previous bad experience with his ex-girlfriend and so wanted to wait a little longer than Alex did. Alex was on the birth control pill before she had sex for the first time and they also used a condom. She does not remember her first time being painful. The first time they broke up she said that she was heartbroken, but after they got back together and casually dated for a few
more years she was not heartbroken the second time they broke up, mainly because she had met someone else which made her feel guilty and sad but not heartbroken. Alex thinks that sex is better with love, even though she believes popular perceptions today suggest that you don’t need love to have sex. She credits the media with perpetuating these ideas, but feels that people’s values are not in the right places anymore. She believes that people would feel better about themselves if they waited until they were in love to have sex.

What is love?

All of the girls I spoke to defined love in different ways, just as all the researchers who investigate love seem to define love in different ways. As mentioned earlier, I have let the young women who participated in my project define love for themselves and like researchers before me, I have found it quite difficult to answer the question ‘what is love?’ (Beall & Sternberg, 1995; Landis & O’Shea, 2000). Although all of the young women I spoke with defined love in different ways, I did notice some similarities in their definitions and in the language they used. Alex and Mary believed that love means putting your lover first, before yourself. Alex said love means “caring about another person and putting them first, before your own needs” (Alex, personal communication, June 2, 2010), while Mary saw love as,

More effortless and as something that exists but that doesn’t need proof because it’s understood and shows in all the unintentional actions of the people in love. Love is when you care for the other person more than yourself most times and when you would do anything for them to ensure their well-being and happiness. (Mary, personal communication, May 19, 2010)

This idea that love involves caring for someone so much that you put their needs above your own might be one that finds its roots in the maternal mother/child discourse that can be found in children’s books, Disney movies, and other media outlets. It was interesting for me to notice that Rachel, Bonnie and Mary all raised the idea of Disney influencing their romantic ideals of love
without being asked. I interpreted their mentions of Disney – which has such clear gender roles in its films – to be representative of one of the ways in which women are socially encouraged to love. I will discuss this more later in this chapter.

When it came to the (un)conditional nature of love, the women I spoke with had very different ideas. Krissy believed that “love is unconditional, and finding that person allows you to express your true self, and enhances those qualities” (Krissy, personal communication, June 6, 2010). Sarah suggested that “…love is conditional in that it has to work at the right time and right place in the mindsets of two people, or else it can pass you by” (Sarah, personal communication, May 19, 2010). Krissy’s idea that love is unconditional seems to fall under the sort of romantic discourse, whereas Sarah’s more “realistic view” (as she called it) that love is more about timing, seems less founded on Disney’s ‘true love’ discourse and may be more derived from her (self proclaimed) feminist upbringing. It is interesting to notice that Sarah still suggested love could ‘pass you by’ if you weren’t careful - an idea Disney uses literally in movies like *The Little Mermaid, Cinderella, and The Princess and the Frog*.

Both Rachel and Bonnie described love as ‘butterflies in your stomach’, terminology I have heard many of my own friends use and which seems to be quite a common way to describe romantic love amongst young women today. This description does not seem to have been explored by researchers but it seems to me to suggest something romantic, and something that can be fleeting, or change easily, as butterflies literally do. I wonder if this phrase unconsciously refers to the idea that love often transforms over the course of a relationship, like butterflies do over their lifespan. I have friends who use the ‘butterflies’ analogy to describe intense physical feelings, or lust, but here the women I spoke with used it to describe love. Rachel described love as feeling an “invisible connection, similar to a magnet, when we are together that makes me want to be together often” and as “the feeling of butterflies in your stomach when together or
when just thinking about that person you love” (Rachel, personal communication, May 26, 2010). This butterflies feeling, paired with her magnet analogy suggests a physical and/or emotional ‘attraction’, a big part of popular discourse on romantic love, and a language I have heard friends use on many occasions. Bonnie described love by saying,

I once told somebody that they made my heart smile. Like just that feeling that’s a very big feeling in your chest that [tells you] this is special or different in some way. And it is hard to put a name on it. But I think that’s what I would call love. I’m sure it’s different for everybody. I don’t know. Like really big butterflies in your stomach that aren’t there just the first time you see somebody or the first time you kiss somebody but they just last there longer. (Bonnie, personal communication, June 2, 2010)

These descriptions of love owe themselves to the specific moment in history that they have been created out of.

The 20-something year olds I interviewed would have grown up watching Disney movies, listening to fairytales, reading Judy Bloom novels, listening to pop songs and watching music videos, and their ideas of love and romance would have been influenced by these and other media (Carpenter, 2009). Without being asked, three of the young women I talked to mentioned Disney as having influenced their beliefs about love and romance. Rachel explained: “My friends and I would always fantasize about falling in love when we were older. TV shows from a very young age made the idea of a girl finding Prince Charming essential, and this set many expectations, I’m sure, as to what I looked for in a partner” (Rachel). This Disney idea of a ‘Prince Charming’ is an idea that many young girls have likely been influenced by, and which has helped to create the language that many of the women used; though it has been important for longer than Disney has been around, the notion that ‘true love’ is ‘magical’ is a big part of many Disney stories. Mary told me she “had always had a bit of a Disney expectation of love, in that I believed that I would fall in love, then get married, and have babies” (Mary). Disney is one of the factors that influences how many children learn about gender roles, an idea I will discuss later in this chapter.
The media play a major role in transmitting cultural scenarios for sexuality as well as for gender. Laura Carpenter writes that “media images typically reflect the prevailing values and behaviors of the societies in which they are created and, in turn, help reproduce those values and behaviors” and that “people’s social locations profoundly influence their interpretations of cultural products” (p. 806, 807). Her suggestion that media reflect cultural values while also helping to replicate them is an example of one way that discourses become normalized, and then become dominant. The women I spoke with all cited the media as having influenced current popular perceptions, including their own beliefs, about love and romance. Mary and Sarah mentioned *Sex and the City* while Rachel, Bonnie and Mary mentioned Disney. Maybe these influences were strong enough to lead the women to appropriate popular definitions of love, and to apply them to their own lives. Disney is all about looking for true love, and though *Sex and the City* is, to some extent at least, about empowerment and sexual freedom, it is also about searching for true love and desiring romance and long term commitment. It was clear that these things were important to the women I spoke with.

Definitions of love are social constructions that are based on beliefs and practices shaped by the dominant discourses of a time and place. Researchers Anne Beall and Robert Sternberg (1995) have argued that love is socially constructed, that is, that love is conceptualized in different ways depending on the time and place. They argue that one can only understand love in terms of its cultural conceptions. They have suggested that an essential part of one’s experience of love is one’s conceptualization of it, so if two people have different definitions of love, they will experience love differently (Beall & Sternberg, 1995). This knowledge can be useful to researchers and sexual health educators who might benefit from understanding how definitions, experiences and ideas of love can change based on the historical and cultural context. The fact that love is socially constructed resonates with theories that men and women understand love and
show their love in different ways, as the young women I spoke with demonstrate in the next section.

**Men and Women Love Differently?**

I asked the girls I spoke to whether they thought love is different for men and women and I found that they mostly thought yes, it was. They spoke of the common stereotypical differences between men and women. Although some of the women recognized that they were drawing on stereotypes, they admitted that they still believed the stereotypes to be true. Sarah suggested that women are usually “more open” about showing their love; though she understood that that was a “stereotypical” story about love, she did believe it to be “true, for the most part” (Sarah). She suggested that if men would be more open about love or romance they might do better in the dating world, telling me “I met a beautiful French man in London and he cooked me dinner once, just as friends, and told me that a woman should be treated as a Queen. This man will do very well!” (Sarah). Re-reading her transcript, it was unclear to me what Sarah meant when she said the man would do ‘very well’. Her tone suggested that he might do well in his sexual conquests while the context suggested she meant that he might do well in his romantic/love life. Regardless, she implied that being more open to the women they date would be beneficial for men and that, generally, men are less open about their romantic feelings than women are.

Alex suggested that men might have a less communicative way of showing their love and gave the example that “men may not tell you, but they may have been asked by their friends to go out that night and said ‘no, I want to hang out with my girlfriend’ but then might not even tell the girl that he had that option” (Alex). Alex thought that women might better understand these sorts of actions, which seem based on love, if their boyfriends explicitly told them about them. Deciding to hang out with their girlfriends rather than their male friends might be better rewarded
by said girlfriends if they knew that was the case. Such miscommunications can also lead to women’s assumptions about love, or the lack thereof. Alex believed that “women are more about communication” and that men use a more “subtle silent way of showing that they love them, in ways that women might not even recognize” (Alex). I believe this perceived difference can be quite important to understanding relationships, as women might be reading their male partners’ behaviours as being based on love when, maybe, they are not.

The idea that women are more verbal and communicative about love might also be due to women fearing heartbreak and abandonment and so wanting verbally to confirm at different stages of their relationships that they are on the same page as their male partners in terms of feelings, commitment and love. Bonnie told me that her mother taught her that “women tend to be more emotional and so they’re perhaps more sensitive to or mindful of showing someone that they love them, whereas men think that they’re showing it, or perhaps think that it doesn’t need to be said as often” (Bonnie). Bonnie thought,

I would agree with her, just based on my experiences. I was always much more driven to show my boyfriend that I loved him, and why I loved him, and because that was important to me, for him to know why I loved him… whereas I felt like I had to always draw it out of him, or ask him, or sometimes remind him that he wasn’t really putting in the effort to make me feel special that way. (Bonnie)

Bonnie also suggested that maybe, ‘generally speaking’, men just don’t think about it (showing their love) as often as women, an idea Mary supported. Mary went on to say,

I think the way men and women perform love is different. I think the feelings are relatively the same, or similar, but that we act out our love in different ways, which are also influenced by societal and media norms. For example, women are expected to show love in some considerably domestic ways... while men are expected to show love through gifts. (Mary)

In many television shows, movies, songs and other popular culture media, men often give women gifts, to show their love or even to ask for forgiveness or to propose marriage. Like Bonnie, Rachel also thought that men and women embody and act out different gender roles related to
love based on media norms. Rachel thought that popular culture might influence what people perceive to be the ‘perfect’ relationship, and gender roles play an important part in women’s expectations of a relationship. Like Bonnie, Rachel also said that men and women express their feelings, especially about love, differently,

Women have higher expectations for how they want the relationship to be and what will define how much the man loves her. I think that a lot of this comes from TV and media of the ‘perfect’ relationship. I think [my partner and I] have similar outlooks and feelings on love. However, I am more likely to tell him how much I love him and more often than he is to express his feelings to me. I think that men and women just express their feelings about love differently. Men don’t express their feelings as often I find, and when they do it is in a different way than a woman. (Rachel)

It is important to this thesis to consider that love, as well as gender, is socially constructed and influenced by popular culture and the media, among more traditional institutions like the family and religion. These explanations of love taken from my interview transcripts demonstrate how gender norms may shape young women’s understandings of love and romance. These understandings seem to be based on the language that is available to them, that is influenced by popular culture and that is part of the dominant discourse. The women I spoke to used popular language to describe their feelings, using words like ‘true love’, ‘Prince Charming’, and ‘empowering’, allowing me to better understand the sort of popular culture that could be influencing them (i.e., Disney’s ‘true love’ or third wave feminism’s empowerment discourse, for example).

The women I spoke with all seemed to agree that men and women love differently, that men tend not to show their affection or talk about their feelings or emotions the way that women do. When Mary told me that women are influenced by different gendered norms than men it seemed clear to me that the ways that young women understand and interpret gender differences in loving is likely important to the ways in which they demonstrate their own love. It is probably
important to the ways that they interpret their partners’ feelings and also to how they might read their partners’ actions or words, including those related to their first sexual experiences.

**Mediated Love and Sexuality**

That women and men seem to love differently is not surprising considering some of the different portrayals of the ways women can love, and the roles of women, that are in the media today. The women I interviewed spoke of many contradictions and ambiguities in the messages that they encounter, as well as in the ways that they want to behave. Mary suggested that she sees certain ideals in the media today, that I have interpreted as third wave feminist ideals, and they offer different options to young women than they might have had in the recent past,

I think notions of love are highly influenced by societal and media norms... there seems to be trends in ideas about love. Like *Sex and the City* has both empowered women to stay single rather than settle, and made them fearful that they will become old maids. (Mary)

This interpretation, that messages in the media give girls more options in terms of their sexual subjectivities, is an important one to note. It seems to me that Mary’s mention of empowerment on television is part of the third wave feminist discourse, but her mention of the fear that single women will stay single and be lonely seems to me a fear tactic from someplace that is trying to maintain these gendered differences.

This idea of empowerment was mentioned by some women I interviewed, like Mary who claimed that *Sex and the City* has empowered women, and like Sarah who claimed that there are many more options for women in terms of domesticity,

[Love] used to mean you loved a guy, moved in with him, fell in love and got married and that was that. Maybe now it means you love a guy, then you don’t, you love another guy, you sleep with the old guy, you marry the new guy, and you divorce that guy and sleep with 10 more guys before maybe marrying another guy, and maybe you have kids too. It’s different and the family dynamics and dynamics of love and relationships are changing. (Sarah)
Not only are relationships changing, but with the availability of numerous sexual scripts, the way women view and approach sex has been changing in recent years as well. Many feminists have suggested sex can be empowering for women, that sex can be a pleasurable and positive experience (Levy, 2005; Tolman, 2002; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006). One of the benefits of seeing sex as empowering might be that fewer girls would suffer from ruined reputations for engaging in sex outside of long term relationships. Current feminisms, with the help of the mass media through television, magazines, and films especially, have taken up what they have called the missing discourse of desire and helped to create a space to discuss pleasure as related to women’s sexuality (Tolman, 2002). When I spoke with Sarah, for example, she said,

[Sex is] a fun thing for people to do and I really enjoy it... for one thing, it’s finally enjoyable. I know how to have multiple orgasms and before I didn’t, and I mean it’s painful when you start.... I wouldn’t feel violated if I just had a one night stand. It’s about taking control of what you do, having your own agenda, and never being pressured to do what you don’t want... I do love sex. Most of my friends are very liberal and a lot of them are strong feminist women who will treat men with respect but use them however they please. I think sex can be many different things for many different people, and that’s ok, as long as at the end of the day you’re in control of what you’re doing and you’re enjoying it. (Sarah)

Women like Sarah seem to be directly influenced by modern or third wave feminism. The discourse surrounding desire and pleasure really owes its existence to the mediated contemporary popularity, influenced especially by third wave feminism. The idea that sex can be empowering, that women can use men (as men may have used women in the past) for pleasure, is an idea that some women today seem to have embraced.

Shows like Sex and the City were mentioned by more than one of the women I interviewed. Sarah and Mary mentioned Sex and the City specifically while they also, along with Rachel and Bonnie, mentioned Hollywood, mass media and pop culture as having influenced their views on sex, love and romance. Laura Carpenter (2009) has shown that the media
influences sexuality and virginity loss and some of the women I spoke to supported Carpenter’s claim,

It [sex] was sometimes an act of conformity, in that I felt like I was doing what was ‘normal’ for my age and relationships. I now look at my past views regarding sex as skewed and fairly against my current values, but understand how they came about... expectations set by the media and friends had a lot to do with my desire to have sex for the first time. I thought I was abnormal for not having had sex by the age of 19. I put some pressure on myself to have sex for these reasons. (Mary)

Mary, like many girls, decided what sorts of behaviours were ‘normal’ based on what she saw in movies, on television, and in magazines. Girls can put a lot of pressure on themselves if they feel that they are behaving outside of these ‘norms’ which can lead some girls to have sex before they are ready (Carpenter, 2001, 2005, 2009).

The popular notion that love will make sex more ‘perfect’ and that sex will bring loving partners closer together seems to have influenced the women in my study. Sarah stated that she “wanted to be in love before doing it, with [her] high school sweetheart” and that “It was perfect like in the movies,” even though she also told me that it hurt. Though the movies may not always portray women’s first experiences with sex as being ‘perfect’, “non-ideal” experiences are often resolved very positively in movies (compared to real life), suggested Carpenter (2009) in her study of virginity loss in ‘reel’ life where she used movies to demonstrate how some young people navigate sexual initiation. Sarah told me that her first sex was “awful” and “so painful” but that she was ok with that because she expected it. Carpenter (2009) suggested that discrepancies between young women’s personal experiences and those sexual scripts they can see in popular films can increase feelings of distress after “imperfect” virginity loss experiences, which did not seem to be the case for Sarah. Sarah’s direct reference to her first experience being like a movie supports claims by researchers who suggest that mass media and dominant discourse influences young women when it comes to their decisions and feelings about sexual activity.
(McRobbie, 1994; Carpenter, 2009). This finding could be useful to educators who might not realize the impact films have on girls’ experiences of their own sexuality.

The women I spoke with said they had also seen how media influenced their friends’ decisions to engage in sex, with some of their friends participating in more casual sex, potentially to decrease their risk of heartbreak and to increase their pleasure. Sarah said that she thinks the popular perceptions of sex are changing, that you no longer need to be in love to have sex. Sarah cited *Sex and the City* as an example that could be influencing popular perceptions of sex, as well as “all of the celebrities with babies who are not married” because if popular young celebrities are having sex outside of marriage then that must be ok to do (Sarah). Rachel similarly believed that many of her friends “have sex for pleasure only and have no emotional attachment to [their] sexual partner. I think that this is becoming more accepted... [and I make] this conclusion [based on] my observations of friends that take this route” (Rachel). Mary went so far as to suggest that movies can influence virginity loss: “There seem to be a lot of norms revolving around the loss of one’s virginity and high school... and how [sexual relationships] should progress. I can say that the notion of losing one’s virginity after prom [like in the movies] has influenced some of my friends from high school” (Mary).

Mary told me that it was not only love that led her to have sex for the first time, “For me... I would say that societal messages and norms and curiosity led to sex within a respectful and affectionate relationship” (Mary). Mary’s words suggested to me that she understood that sex within a relationship is more valued socially than sex outside of one. Like Rachel, Mary didn’t mention desire or pleasure when she told me about why she wanted to have sex. This, of course, doesn’t mean desire was not an issue but rather that it was not a part of her narrative. Although it was not a task of this thesis to investigate, it would be interesting to see whether this lack of discussion of desire and pleasure might owe itself to the sexual double standard and the fact that
women have often been stigmatized, especially in the recent past, for discussing their feelings of desire and for being seen as their own sexual agents. The sexual double standard, as I have hopefully demonstrated in my literature review, still exists today and might be one of the reasons that sex is seen, for women at least, as more legitimate when it occurs within the context of a loving long-term relationship.

**Part of the sexual double standard: Love legitimates Sex for Women**

Young women today are led to believe that it is more socially acceptable for sexual activity to occur within a romantic relationship. Girls are presumed to be sexually active inside (but not outside) of sexual relationships, despite changing practices (Risman & Schwartz, 2002). This leads to the view that it is more socially acceptable to lose one’s virginity within a long term romantic relationship than outside of one where doing so could lead to stigmatization (Risman & Schwartz, 2002; Fillion, 2007). This view can also lead to the consequences of sex, like STIs and unplanned pregnancies, being more socially accepted when they occur within a relationship. Young women may learn that they will get more sympathy and less often be stigmatized if they have sex within relationships.

Researchers Barbara Risman and Pepper Schwartz (2002) found, in a large survey of sexuality studies, that for girls, love seems to justify desire. In 2002 they wrote that “Girls today may be able to have sex without stigma, but only with a steady boyfriend” (p. 20). They found that a young woman can be defamed, called a ‘slut, and might not be respected if she has sex outside of a romantic relationship, has too many partners, or admits to an appetite-driven sexuality (p. 20). From my own experiences, and those of my friends, I can see why they might have come to this conclusion and I somewhat agree. Even some of the women I spoke with, like Alex and Rachel who admitted fear at the prospect of their number of partners increasing, seemed
to imply, without explicitly stating, that sex within a relationship was ‘socially’ safer than sex outside of one. I agree that young women can still be stigmatized for having sex, especially in the smaller institutional settings of secondary schools; when I was in high school hallway gossip often revolved around who was sleeping with whom and which girls were ‘getting around’.

Of the girls I interviewed, Rachel, Alex and Sarah alluded to the sexual double standard. Rachel told me, “I was afraid that if this relationship didn’t work out that I would have many more sexual partners before I found ‘the one’” (Rachel). Her tone of voice implied that she did not want to have numerous sexual partners. I interpreted her distaste for numerous sexual partners to her fear of getting a negative reputation, a fear many young women, including Alex, share. Alex told me that she disliked it when her number of partners increased: “And so I think that I’ve always felt regret, if only because I hate the idea of this number going up... I’m like ‘oh my gosh, it’s been like 5 people now’ or like whatever and I’m like ‘oh, one more person’” (Alex). Alex told me about this regret when she was explaining where some of the guilt she feels might come from; she told me the guilt she felt about her increasing number of sexual partners might be “a really deep-seeded Catholic thing.” She also told me that one of the only things that, for her, justified having sex outside of marriage, was love, telling me that “if I’m not married to them, at least I can love them” (Alex). She said she does feel something like guilt for having had a number of partners, she also said, “I feel regret after I have sex with someone I am not in love with.” Alex told me that the media has influenced popular perceptions that “you don’t need love for sex.” She continued, “I know it’s fine to have sex if you’re not in love, but I know that from my experiences I don’t feel as good after” (Alex). Of course, the number of partners Alex has had is a result of decisions that she has made, but the contradictory messages she has received about having sex freely ‘like men do’ versus having sex while still trying to remain innocent (and not
get labelled a ‘slut’) have led her to have mixed feelings about the number of sexual partners she has had.

Like Alex, who felt guilty when she did not love the person she had sex with and had better sex if she was in love, the other girls I interviewed also seemed to agree that love helped to legitimate (first) sex. Sarah told me “He told me he loved me. How perfect! I had wanted to be ‘in love’ before losing my virginity and this was perfect.” Her comment is interesting because it seemed that when her partner verbally expressed his love for the first time that they, as a couple, were now ‘in love’. She did not tell me whether they were in love when she realized that she was ‘in love’.

Though none of the women I spoke with explicitly mentioned the sexual double standard, several of them referred to feelings they had that seemed reinforced and directly influenced by it. For Alex, the fear of having an increasing number of sexual partners is likely influenced by the sexual double standard while for Rachel, her fear of having more sexual partners before finding ‘the one’ seems to be similarly influenced. Though the women I spoke with did not explicitly mention it, it seems, like sociologists and sexologists Barbara Risman and Pepper Schwartz (2002) have stated, that the sexual double standard is still alive and well. Twenty years ago eighty-seven percent of eighteen to twenty-six year olds surveyed in the United States believed that a sexual double standard exists (Bouris, 1993). In 2002 Risman and Schwartz found that young women still reported being worried about being labelled a slut and that the only way young women can reduce the stigma of sex is to have it with a steady boyfriend. Though it might sound harsh, from my own experience I have to agree with Risman and Schwartz’s argument that,

For girls, love justifies desire... If a young woman has sexual liaisons outside of a publicly acknowledged “coupledom,” she is at risk of being defamed. If a girl changes boyfriends too often and too quickly, she risks being labelled a slut. This puts her one down as a power player in her relationship, because her boyfriend does not have to worry about moving on too quickly and being stigmatized for his sexual choices. (p. 20)
This sexual double standard, that it is ok for boys to have numerous sexual partners/ experiences but not for girls to, has not been eradicated, despite feminism’s progress towards creating gender equality. Though I did not speak to any men about their experiences with love and sex, it would be interesting to learn men’s views.

Love and first sex

All of the girls I spoke with believed that love is an important prerequisite for having sex, especially for their first times. All of the girls wanted to be in love before they had sex for the first time – and most of them were. Bonnie was the only girl who told me she was not in love the first time she had sex, although she had wanted to be, but love still influenced her decision, as I will explain later. Alex, Mary and Krissy had originally planned to wait until marriage to have sex for the first time, though none of them did. Mary told me

I had always had a bit of a Disney expectation of love, in that I believed that I would fall in love, get married, and have babies. It’s not that I expected to marry the first person that I dated, but I do remember thinking that I would wait until marriage to have sex when I was in high school. (Mary)

Alex similarly stated, “I know that I didn’t want to have sex until I was married when I was a kid” (Alex). This desire to wait for marriage might have been due to their religious upbringings: both Mary and Alex had attended Catholic high school where sex is heavily discouraged before marriage. Krissy’s desire to wait for marriage might have had something to do with the importance she placed upon love and sex being related, and on love leading to marriage. Krissy was always looking for long term love and commitment in her relationships. She believed you dated someone because you “loved them and you saw a future with them” (Krissy). She said that “the relationship had to have a future, the future always being marriage, and if it didn’t, then it was no longer worth the time or commitment required” (Krissy).
Reginald Bibby (2009) found that teens today place a much greater importance on romance, loyalty, and love than they did in the recent past (in Gillis, 2009). As I mentioned earlier, Bibby also found that, although 60% of respondents in his study disapproved of premarital sex when the partners ‘liked’ each other, 90% of respondents accepted premarital sex if the partners truly ‘loved’ one another (in Gillis, 2009).

Except for Bonnie, all of the girls in my study were in love with the person they had sex with for the first time. Bonnie was still influenced by love, however, admitting that there was the promise of love from her boyfriend in the future; “he did say that he thought that he could love me in the future, if our relationship was to go on.” Sarah told me “love was the tipping point that got me into bed... alright, you love me, now we can have sex.” Rachel told me love was a factor for her decision to have sex for the first time. “I wanted to be sure that I was in love, and not just feeling lust... before I had sex. To make sure I was in love I prolonged the wait of having sex until I was sure about my feelings” (Rachel). Rachel did not wait for desire to have sex, but for love. Alex told me that she had considered having sex with an earlier boyfriend but, “I just wasn’t as sure about it. I don’t think that I really loved him.” So she waited until she found love, which she found with her next boyfriend, whom she believes she loved.

All 6 girls agreed that for their ‘first time’ love had been somewhat necessary for sex and talking with them I learned that trust was important too. Rachel told me,

I wanted the first time to be special and I wanted it to be with someone that I loved. It meant that I was sharing myself with another person in a way that no one else had ever experienced... it was a big deal for me to trust someone enough to have sex. (Rachel)

The other girls I spoke with mirrored her sentiments on trust and indicated that love and trust go hand in hand, and are both important factors in decisions to have sex for the first time. Krissy and Bonnie spoke about the importance of trust in loving relationships, and Sarah told me “sex doesn’t need love, but with love, sex has a different meaning. In fact, sex can be better because
you trust the person more” (Sarah). Trust was important in order for the girls to be comfortable enough to fall in love. Trust also seemed to play an important role in their decisions to have sex. As Rachel said, liking someone enough to share her body with him so intimately required trust which she linked to love.

Discourses that legitimate first sex with love likely influenced the young women in my study who all wanted to be in love before having sex. In the 1980s and early 1990s, love as a reason that legitimized sex was supported by the culture at large, as well as by sex education materials which urged teenagers to “wait for love” before having intercourse (Thompson, 1995, p. 23). In the 1950s, social scientist Winston Ehrmann (1959) found that love increased girls’ desire for sexual activities. He concluded that going steady was the greatest determining factor of girls’ sexual behaviour after many girls told him that they never would have gone all the way if they had not been ‘going steady’. Similarly, research from the 1930s found that love legitimated sex for women if it was with the man they expected to marry (Fass, 1977).

Not only can feelings of love lead to girls’ desire to have sex, but many women are looking to find a deep emotional connection and bond through love (Bartky, 1990a). When I spoke with Krissy she told me,

I think [sex] is personal... I think most women have sex because they want that deeper connection, in most cases. Sometimes that is not what we end up with, but I do feel like that is often what women are looking for – intimacy... I did feel a deep connection afterwards. I felt like we had a very special bond. (Krissy)

Krissy’s belief that most women are looking for a deeper connection, for intimacy, supports research that has found that many women are looking for a deep loving connection and that some will have sex in the hopes of finding it (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Johnson, 2005; Bartky, 1990a; Thompson, 1995; Rosenthal, Gifford & Moore, 1998). As I discussed in chapter three, some young women have tried to trade sex for love. Thompson (1995) found that some girls were afraid of losing their boyfriends if they withheld sex. Mary told me that she was afraid her
boyfriend might abandon her if she did not have sex with him: “I think I thought on some level that I would lose my boyfriend if I didn’t have sex with him” but then, even though she did have sex with him, they ended up breaking up two weeks later. Mary, however, admitted that, “[my fear of losing my boyfriend] definitely wasn’t my main motivator. I wanted to see what everyone else was talking about.” Though I had set out on this project expecting to have found that at least some of the women had traded sex for love, and ended up heartbroken, I did not find even one.

None of the women I spoke with explicitly tried to trade sex for love. Sarah waited until she had a verbal confirmation from her partner that he loved her. Rachel waited until she was sure that she was in love, and not just experiencing ‘lust’, before she would have sex for the first time. Although Bonnie did not love her partner when she had sex with him, she did love him later, and he did tell her that he might love her later as well. Alex and Mary waited for love before they had sex for the first time. Krissy waited until she was in love, and until she wanted to express her love physically, before she had sex. The women were all in serious committed relationships; three of them had initially wanted to wait until marriage to have sex for the first time, so it was interesting to hear what the point of dating had been for each of them.

The Point of Dating

Most of the girls I interviewed shared a similar view about what they believed the point or end goal of dating was – to find a long-term love that would prepare them for a future of marriage and commitment. Krissy, Bonnie, Mary, and Rachel all wanted to find a long term relationship that had a future. Bonnie believed dating would give her experience and practice for her future ‘grown-up’ relationships while Mary recalled:

I remember being completely in love with the idea of a long-term relationship. I looked at most of my dates/hook-ups as stepping stones to possible long-term relationships. I wanted all of my dates to turn into long-term relationships because I wanted someone I could rely on and someone I could do couple-y things with, like I saw many of my
friends doing. I remember feeling huge pressure, mostly self-imposed, to date and be in a relationship and find the person I [was] going to marry. (Mary)

Rachel and Krissy also wanted an emotional connection and thought you dated someone because you loved them and saw a future with them: “I was never the type of person to date someone for the sake of it. The relationship had to have a future, the future always being marriage, and if it didn’t, then it was no longer worth the time or commitment required” (Krissy).

The young women I spoke with thought of dating as a type of practice for future relationships. They wanted to find an emotional connection that might one day turn into, or at least prepare them for, a deeper connection that would lead to commitment and eventually marriage. Rachel said that she not only desired love, but she also wanted to get married to a “great man.” She believed that love was essential for that so she wanted to be in love in order to achieve her “dream”, through dating, of marriage and long-term love (Rachel).

This belief in the purpose of dating is supported by the findings of other researchers, but there is not much literature published in this area. Historian Beth Bailey (2004) suggested that since World War II the purpose of dating amongst youth has changed, from a competition for popularity to a preparation for marriage. Other research suggests that it is now more socially accepted for sexual activity to occur within an un-married romantic relationship, so young people might also view dating as one of the safe places they can experiment with their sexuality (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Regardless of the reasons young women date, it appears that dating today is sometimes motivated and structured by the dominant social norms on adolescent behaviour. Some of these norms are reflected in television shows, movies, and music videos that seem to have some influence on some young women’s desires to have sex for the first time within the context of a romantic relationship.
Preparation for first sex

When it comes to virginity loss, young women approach it in a number of ways. According to Carpenter (2005) some girls plan ahead for months, other girls decide spontaneously that ‘tonight’s the night.’ All but one of the girls I talked to told me that in preparing for first sex they went on the birth control pill, afraid of the possibility of unwanted pregnancy. I asked each girl I talked to whether their first sex was pre-planned, and also what different things they might have discussed or negotiated with their partners, like whether they considered pregnancy, birth control, STIs, pain, etc. Sarah was on the birth control pill before she started having sex, and had “a lot of condoms” on hand “just in case.” Sarah told me that she was “overprotected” in terms of having condoms available, that her mom taught her well and that she felt very prepared (Sarah). Rachel told me that she was “nervous about pregnancy and STIs and took precautions to get birth control prior to having sex”, and, that she “made sure that a condom would be available when the time came to have sex” (Rachel).

I found it interesting, however, that not all of the girls took precautions against STIs. Mary, similarly worried about pregnancy, said that she “was on the birth control pill already” (before having sex for the first time). She told me that “he offered to use a condom [but] I encouraged him not to. We were both virgins and so my concern regarding STIs was minimal. I had wanted to be in love the first time I had sex and had communicated that to my boyfriend at the time” suggesting that love played in to her decision not to use a condom with her boyfriend (Mary). Mary’s desire to have sex without a condom, which she seemed to see as a way of communicating her love to her boyfriend (though why she thought that remains unclear to me), fits with what other researchers have found on the relationship between love and safer sex. As I discussed in chapter three, it seems as though love can impede decision making around safer sex. Bonnie, more worried about pain than STIs or even pregnancy, told me,
I thought a lot about pain [but] I don’t think I brought it up with him. I mostly talked to my girlfriends who had had sex already because it seemed that they would know better than he would. I think he probably considered that I was concerned about it... We never really talked about it so I don’t really know for sure, but it’s just an inclination that I have because he seemed very concerned afterwards about whether I’d experienced any pain. As far as pregnancy, um, no, we didn’t discuss that until after we started having sex, and STIs we didn’t [discuss], neither of us got tested... I hadn’t been with anybody sexually and so deduced that we were ‘clean’. Not the safest route probably. (Bonnie)

Like Bonnie, Alex also told me that she did not remember talking about STIs “at all” with her partner. She did start taking the birth control pill before having sex, and thinks she and her boyfriend talked about pain beforehand but remembers that “it wasn’t very painful.” She told me that “we did talk about pregnancy a lot, and we did use a condom” suggesting that they were more concerned with pregnancy (the pill and condom were both used for protection) than with STIs (Alex). Krissy told me, “Pregnancy was a big worry. I went on the pill months before I ever actually had sex” but she said that she was “probably most worried about how it would change the relationship. Was he just in the relationship for sex? Was he as committed as I was? Did he understand what a big deal it was?” (Krissy). Krissy, though worried about pregnancy, was more worried about whether her partner was committed to her, and whether he might be using her for sex, a fear other researchers have discovered is common amongst girls in general (Thompson, 1995; Bouris, 1993).

Listening to the girls talk about their preparations for their first sex, I couldn’t help but wonder why the risk of pregnancy (which can be prevented after the fact with morning after pills or with abortion) always seems to outweigh the risk of STIs (some of which are treatable but not curable)? The girls Thompson (1995) spoke to also considered the risk of unwanted pregnancy to be one of their biggest fears, even though, at the time, the birth control pill, as well as medical and surgical abortions, were already fairly accessible and available. I am not sure why this might be, nor is it within the scope of this project to ask, but I think that it is an important factor to note. Fear of unwanted pregnancy seems to be something that young women can take care of
themselves: getting a birth control pill prescription can be done at teen walk-in clinics, sexual health clinics, public health units, or at a physician’s office, as most of the girls I spoke with demonstrated. Having the ability to prevent unwanted pregnancies, independently and without the help of their sexual partners, might be one of the reasons so many young women go on the pill before having sex. Demonstrating their sexual independence this way, taking responsibility for their sexual selves, is something that many third wave feminists, like second wave feminists, consider to be important and is something that allows many young women to feel ‘empowered’ by sex.

Young women might not take as much responsibility for STI protection because barrier methods like condoms have, in the past, been the ‘boys’ responsibility (Bauman, Karasz & Hamilton, 2007; Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006). Asking a male partner for ‘protection’ can make women feel vulnerable, and when this is taken into consideration along with the knowledge that love can lead some young women to make un-safe decisions about sex, or to trade sex for love, it is not difficult to see why some young women might not always demand condom use when they are already on the pill (Allen, 2003; Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006). Looking back I wish I had asked the women why they did or did not use a condom; at the time I was more interested in what sorts of negotiations and plans they were making about safer sex and had not considered the fact that they would not all use condoms.

As mentioned in Chapter three, it is important to note that being in love can lead young women to be less careful in terms of safer sex practices. Researchers have found that not only is unprotected intercourse interpreted as more ‘romantic and special’ but that unprotected sex is also viewed as a strategy by some young women for maximizing the possibility that a longer term relationship will develop out of a casual sexual encounter (Rosenthal, Gifford & Moore, 1998). Mary did not share any personal insights she may have had about her own experiences in this
regard, and I wish I had thought to ask. Schafer (2008) found that love often overwhelmed young women leading them to make potentially dangerous decisions when it came to their engagement in sex. It appears that while the women in my study did have concerns about pregnancy, they were able to manage these so they did not outweigh their desire to find an emotional connection through intercourse.

Heartbreak

Setting out on this project I believed, like other researchers before me, that heartbreak could ‘ruin’ a girl, in ways that other outcomes of romantic relationships could not and that it was one of the worst possible outcomes of a teenage romantic relationship (Thompson, 1995; Crouter & Booth, 2006). Although there has not been much research done in this area, there have been a few researchers who have taken heartbreak seriously. Adolescence researchers Ann Crouter and Alan Booth (2006) have said that unrealistic expectations of love and sex can lead to broken hearts and that “a broken heart is a far more serious condition than many scientists, educators, and parents realize” (p. 12). In one of the only instances of medicalizing heartbreak I have come across in my research, they have likened romantic love to addictive substances and have shown that when girls are ‘dumped’ or rejected, heartbreak can mimic the signs of drug withdrawal and include depression, crying spells, lethargy, sleep problems, anxiety, and changes in eating patterns. They have called heartbreak “one of humanity’s most dangerous sorrows” (Crouter & Booth, 2006, p. 19). Other researchers have agreed that break-ups are important to adolescents, but are still not taken seriously enough (Barber, 2006; Welsh, Grello & Harper, 2004; Lesko, 2001).

All of the girls I spoke to, except Rachel who was still dating her first boyfriend, told me they had experienced heartbreak at least once. While heartbreak had really hurt the girls who had
experienced it – some of them experiencing it more than once – it had not had the debilitating impact that Crouter and Booth (2006) or Thompson (1995) had warned about. It seems to me that a slight bit of heartbreak might even be beneficial for girls. It might help them to deal with later losses in life, with grief, and with mourning. None of the women I spoke to experienced severe heartbreak symptoms; none of them locked themselves in their rooms for weeks, gained weight, or became clinically depressed. I had expected to find that heartbreak would have played a larger role in the girls’ understandings of first sex, but I ended up finding that love, actually, played the larger role.

Although none of the women I spoke with had been ‘ruined’ by love, I did still get them all to define heartbreak for me. Bonnie told me heartbreak is like,

Putting a lot of energy and feeling and trust into a relationship and then being disappointed because what you put into it, you weren’t getting out. I guess you just didn’t receive what you got in return. So it’s sort of hurtful in that way. I guess heartbreak is like feeling that you’re not worth the love that you put in. (Bonnie)

Alex defined heartbreak as an “aching, can’t sleep, so sad all the time” feeling (Alex). Sarah explained that it is “when your heart actually hurts for someone. It makes you cry. You can’t stand to be apart, and it seems unnatural to be. It is the worst.” (Sarah). Similarly, Mary said that heartbreak “is when you can think about nothing but the person you don’t have. Everything you see and hear reminds you of that person and how you aren’t with them anymore” (Mary). Krissy defined heartbreak by equating it with “grieving... you feel like you lost something, whether that be the other person or the part of yourself that has changed. It definitely affects your self-esteem as well. You question if there is something wrong with you, and if you are the reason it didn’t work out” (Krissy). She said that it is hard because you worry that you “might never have that feeling [of love] again... that feeling of connection will never happen the same way with someone else” (Krissy). The language the girls used makes it possible to see why Crouter and Booth (2006) might have likened heartbreak to withdrawal and why other researchers have found
correlations between heartbreak and the onset of major depressive episodes; many of the girls used words that described being unable to sleep, being sad all the time, crying, obsessing over their love interest and feeling anxious that they might not find another relationship. However, all five girls who experienced break-ups began dating again only months later and none of them appeared to have suffered any long term negative consequences from their experiences of heartbreak.

Krissy and Mary had both been hurt especially hard by their first breakups, probably, they believed, because the relationships had involved their first experiences with sex. Krissy told me “it was hard to let go of that first major connection” (Krissy). Krissy felt that the first breakup was the hardest, because it is often the first “real connection with someone, on an emotional and physical level” which for her “require[d] a lot of trust” (Krissy). Mary had similar feelings and thought one of the reasons it hurt so much to break up was because “it was my first real break-up and I hadn’t experienced some of the feelings before” (Mary).

This intense hurt after ending a romantic and sexual relationship has many important implications for parents, educators, and researchers. Some girls may seek out more casual sexual relationships to avoid future heartbreak. Although none of the women I spoke to told me about this from personal experience, Rachel did tell me about some of her friends’ experiences,

I think that monogamy is not as important as it once was and it is difficult to find a partner that has similar perceptions about love and sex. I think that many people have sex for pleasure only and have no emotional attachment to their sexual partner. I think that this is becoming more accepted and is often done by people who are afraid to fall in love after a bad break up. I’m making this conclusion in my observations of friends that take this route. (Rachel)

Research suggests that for earlier generations women were more afraid of ‘soiled’ reputations than they were of heartbreak (Levy, 2005; Rubin 1990). Rachel was suggesting that she had observed her friends avoiding relationships and love in order to protect themselves from feeling heartbroken again. Some of the other girls are also more wary of love now than they had been.
Heartbreak seems more dangerous and more possible now, when the women are a little more grown up and aware of the hurt they are vulnerable to, especially as compared to a soiled reputation. Bonnie told me,

I don’t know why I have this aversion to loving somebody but I feel like it makes me very vulnerable and I’m not very comfortable with that and with surrendering that much of my feeling and rationality to an emotion that I really have no control over, and that tends to lead towards heartbreak. I wanted the wonderful idea of love, [love] that is unconditional... [but] I think that after having sex for the first time, and having that relationship, and then the breakup and heartbreak and stuff, maybe I’m sort of protecting myself from having those inclinations. (Bonnie)

Sarah is also currently avoiding love. When Sarah found out that her boyfriend cheated on her, right after they had had sex for the first time, she said “I lost faith in mankind then” and since then she has tried to avoid more heart ache,

I think some people would give love a greater chance than I do and let themselves fall into it. My experiences with boys, liberal attitude, and commitment to my work and life don’t ever really let me let myself fall in love, so I don’t reach that part with people. I also have really high standards and so don’t just fall for anyone. (Sarah)

Despite the risks, Rachel and Bonnie still believed that love was something worth searching for, though it might be a potentially painful search. Bonnie explained,

As I grew older I think I grew more sceptical. I called it realistic, but I think it’s probably just sceptical or cynicism. And I started to question the different kinds of love there were, and I don’t know, I probably still, even to this day, harbour this feeling of admiration for the romantic idea of love, which I believe exists, from when I was younger seeing it seemed so true, but looking at it now, I don’t know, it’s like, how can you tell? I just don’t know. (Bonnie)

I find it quite interesting to note that all of the girls did end up giving love another chance in the end. If the girls were not in romantic relationships when I spoke to them, they had been since they had had sex for the first time, and many of them had even experienced love since then. Sarah told me that even though she had lost faith in mankind when she was younger it has now been “somewhat restored” since she has been in love again and has experienced meaningful connections in other relationships (Sarah). All of the women, with the exception of Rachel who is
dating the same partner she first had sex with, have had sex with new partners since their first times, and many of them have been in love since. Many of the girls seemed to think that love might be worth the heartbreak after all. It seems, then, that the heartbroken feelings five of the six girls ‘suffered’ were not debilitating as I had initially expected they might be. Love was the most important factor in girls’ decisions to have sex, and I was happy to hear that the girls had ‘no regrets’ about their first experiences with sex.

No Regrets

Mary told me that even though she had not been completely in love before she had sex for the first time she “never regretted losing [her] virginity in that way because it was a real expression of what [she was] feeling at the time, even if not love” (Mary). Sarah went a step further and said even though her first experience of sex was “awful [and] so painful,” she was “cool with it” (Sarah). Sarah told me that she had no regrets, and suggested that the physical pain she felt was an expected part of the experience for her and made her a stronger person. Many women have told other researchers that they felt degraded or confused about their first experiences with sex but the girls I spoke to made it clear that it is more complicated than that, and that they have no regrets (Bouris, 1993; Doan & Williams, 2008). Perhaps more girls are claiming to find empowerment in sex because they now have access to ‘no regrets’ discourse that was not available to previous generations. Popular music star Katy Perry’s song “Teenage Dream” from October 2010 features the chorus “Let’s go all the way tonight, no regrets, just love.” These lyrics add to widespread discourses that suggest it is okay for women to have sex, that sex need not be a source of regret.

Bonnie told me that she thinks that true love stories are ‘beautiful’, and she has hope that true love is possible. The girls I spoke with all believe that love today is different than love fifty
years ago. Many of them said that it seems more socially acceptable now to fall in love later in life or to get married at an older age. Bonnie told me that she thought “love was more genuine” fifty years ago, and that it seems like “love was easier.” She said that love seemed to last forever then and to be very important and more based on families. I wonder if she would think that feminism, updated divorce laws (with more equal rights for women), longer academic experiences or more professional career opportunities for women have influenced her perceptions of love? I did not get a chance to ask her.

**Conclusion**

The girls I spoke with all gave priority to love in their decisions to have heterosexual intercourse for the first time. When I interviewed her, Rachel was still dating the boy she first had sex with, Mary was engaged, Alex was in love, and Krissy was married. Sarah and Bonnie were still searching for love, and Sarah was “finally” enjoying the sex she was having along the way.

Looking back at their first experiences with sex, it was interesting to hear that three of the women I spoke with would now qualify the love they thought they felt when they ‘lost their virginity.’ Alex said “I loved him in the way that 16 year olds can love someone.” Krissy said she had felt like she was in love “and wanted to be able to express it. But looking back on it now, I think I was also too young to truly understand what that all meant” (Krissy). And, Mary told me, “I think that I thought I loved him, but now having experienced love, I know that I didn’t.” These young women acknowledged that their definitions of love have changed as they have grown older and more experienced. However, regardless of how the women have qualified their youthful feelings, it was clear to me, talking to them and then reading their transcripts, that they had all wanted to find love, and really valued the idea of “true love” in a long term relationship.
Only Sarah – who had wanted love to be a part of her first sexual experience – would now say that love and sex do not necessarily need to be linked:

Sex doesn’t need love... it’s about taking control of what you do, having your own agenda, and never being pressured to do what you don’t want... no... I don’t feel I need to be in love to have sex... I do love sex. Most of my friends are very liberal and a lot of them are strong feminist women who will treat men with respect but use them [sexually] however they please. I think sex can be many different things for many different people, and that’s ok, as long as at the end of the day you’re in control of what you’re doing and you’re enjoying it... [Now] I’ve been less rational with having sex. I don’t want to do it on the first date, but I also really like doing it! (Sarah)

Now that she is older and more career driven, with little free time for dating and romance, Sarah has decided to ‘finally enjoy’ her sexual experiences and not to worry whether they happen within a long term loving relationship. She does, however, still seem to be a romantic at heart, telling me a story about a man she dated a few years ago who might be her one true love, and how

Sometimes I wonder whether my time with this one man and the amazing relationship we had will be the one defining relationship of my life. I would like to think no, because I want to experience more, and I know there is so much to experience, but he actually knows me so well, and I know him. (Sarah)

Sarah was also the only woman I spoke to who claimed to be a feminist herself, and to have been raised by a feminist mother. Feminism could be one of the influences that distinguished Sarah from the other women in terms of how she is experiencing sex now. Feminism, and massive changes in feminist portrayals in the media and popular culture, have helped to diversify sexual scripts, giving some young women the opportunity to choose how, when, and for what reasons they might want to have sex – a luxury many women in previous generations did not have.

Sarah’s feelings here might be similarly understood by other young women today. On the 10th April, 2010, Maclean’s magazine published an article titled, “Teen girls in charge: when it comes to sex, teen girls are starting to act more like boys” (Gulli, 2009). Using the data from Project Teen Canada (see Chapter 3), the article reported that young women today are much more likely to find a romantic partner and have sex on their own terms: nearly 50% of young women
now say it is acceptable to have sex after a few dates, up from 35% in 1984 (Gulli, 2009). Alex McKay from the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN) suggested that “the traditional sexual script of male-female relationships in which the male is the initiator and controller is rapidly eroding” (as cited in Gulli, 2009). This data suggests that there are other young women who share Sarah’s feelings and act similarly.

It seems as though the media and popular culture have played a role in the feelings and beliefs these six young women have. It was interesting to me to find out that the women I spoke with are not the girls who were participating in the rainbow parties and train parties that are causing such moral panics; all of the girls I spoke with had sex for the first time within a loving and committed relationship and were not only looking for love but highly valued the idea of romantic love in their lives.

Journalist Laura Sessions Stepp has been writing about young women, youth culture and ‘hooking up’ for more than fifteen years and she says that although hooking up can be connected to popularity for girls today, for the most part the girls still feel “somewhat slutty” and are simply “not happy doing this” (as cited in Fillion, 2007). Although women have come a long way in gaining more equal footing with men, and although discourse on sex and sexuality is slowly changing, girls like Rachel and Alex still fear that if they have more sexual partners they might jeopardize their reputations. Their concerns make it clear that feminism has only brought us so far and that we are not, as some people like to suggest, living in a post-feminist world. And, although not all women feel ‘slutty’, factors like religious and family values as well as peer groups and media can make some girls feel fine about hooking-up while making other girls feel badly about themselves.

That love plays such an important and valued role in some girls’ first experiences of sexual intercourse is an important finding. Some parents might feel reassured knowing that not
every girl is participating in oral sex parties and hooking up for casual sex as the media might have us believe. And it should also be reassuring to parents to hear that the women I spoke to had sex in their mid to late teens, as do the majority of heterosexually active girls in Canada. None of these girls were having sex in elementary school and one of these girls even waited until university. My hope is that this project will counter the sensational coverage of girls’ sexualities and that it will demonstrate to parents, sexual health educators and other adults concerned about girls that we cannot generalize about girls’ sexuality. Different things are important to different girls. For the girls in the study, the most important thing in their decisions to have sex for the first time was love.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

I began this project with the desire to gain a greater understanding of how love and romance might influence young women’s decisions to have heterosexual intercourse. I hoped I might be able to use the stories young women told me to better determine how love influenced their decisions to have sex, and what sorts of outcomes they experienced in terms of heartbreak and lost love. I asked six young women to tell me about their first experiences with heterosexual intercourse, and how love and romance influenced their decisions to go ‘all the way’ for the first time. I have done my best to stay true to their meanings and stories, and to properly contextualize their words.

I did not expect that with influence of third wave feminism and what seems to be an era of hyper-sexualized media and popular culture, that some girls today would feel that sex is mostly an expression of love, and a ‘deeper connection of intimacy.’ When I set out to interview girls, I partly expected girls to tell me more about how sex was ‘empowering’ for them, and how they could do ‘it’ without regrets, ‘like men’. I have been surprised to discover that, even with the popularity of shows like Sex and the City and Gossip Girl, these girls still desired love and long term commitment. I have reflected on how feminist discourses on sex have changed and I have listened to young women’s stories in order to share their voices in the contemporary context.

I am aware that many of the questions that I have raised are the same questions feminists have been asking for thirty years or longer. Despite huge changes in the socio-sexual climate, the question of how women experience a world where we are often subordinate to men is still relevant because women still experience patriarchal oppression. Feminist questions are also still relevant because women experience their sexual selves largely in relation to the dominant
discourses available to them. Dominant discourse still often stigmatizes female sexuality if that sexuality occurs outside socially sanctioned and normalized contexts. In this project I have tried to analyze young women’s experiences of their first heterosexual intercourse in order to better understand both dominant sexual discourses and young women’s subjective experiences of first sex, love, and romance.

I realize that we cannot make generalizations about teenage girls and sex. I spoke to only six young women and found many different motivations within them for having sex, just as Thompson (1995) has showed us. And even though the meaning of sex is changing, sexual scripts are changing, and the sexual-social culture is changing, there are still some girls who maintain somewhat traditional notions about sex, as the young women I spoke with demonstrate. If there was more research in the field maybe we would find out that these so-called ‘traditional’ notions of sex are actually quite prevalent still. It would be an interesting area for future research, especially some of the questions it might raise for feminists who have tended to see traditional ideas about love and sex as somewhat problematic.

**Limitations of the Analysis**

There are limitations to all research projects. In conducting a qualitative research project with only six participants, all of whom were white upper-middle class university-educated women living in Ontario, I am aware that one of the largest limitations in my project is the small size of my sample group. However I did find it interesting that these university-educated upper-middle-class women were as concerned with romance as they were. I would have made the (incorrect) assumption that they would have been less concerned with romance than other women without their privileges. Having access to empowerment discourse, to the media representations of casual-sex (like the professional working-women in *Sex and the City*) could have been more
influential on the women I spoke with, but they all still highly valued love and romance, indeed required them, for their first experiences with sex. Before embarking on this project I had not realized that there existed some literature suggesting that romance is actually more of an upper-middle-class way of life because it requires not only time but also financial resources (Illouz, 2006). All of the women I spoke with were also likely influenced by their upper-middle-class social locations, as well as by their university educations, when it came to interpreting cultural products like film, media and other popular culture, as well as when it came to answering the questions I asked them in the interviews (Carpenter, 2009).

Another limitation is that I made a “romantic relationship” a requirement for eligibility to participate in my study. All interested participants had to meet my age requirement (18-23 years) and had to have had a consensual heterosexual first experiences with intercourse influenced by or occurring within a romantic relationship. But to require that their first sex occurred in the context of a relationship is not the same as requiring a heavy investment in love, or really any investment in love, or saying that love needed to be a part of their first experience with sex at all. Although the women needed to have been influenced by a romantic relationship, I did not specify that love had to be involved, and there are greater and lesser influences of love. I believe it is important to make note of this possible limitation, but do not believe that it negatively influenced this project.

I am also aware that there is an element of interpretation to my analysis (as with all qualitative research) and that another researcher might have interpreted my transcript data differently than I have here. I am not, however, trying to find truths or make generalizations about young women, sex, love and romance. Not all research methods acknowledge that all those involved in the research will influence the outcome of the dialogue produced - human interaction changes based on numerous variables. Knowing that a sort of fictional element exists in all memories is important for anyone conducting research; “Experience is at once always an
interpretation and in need of an interpretation” (Scott, 1992, p. 37). When recalling past experiences in order to create a narrative there is always a gap between what actually happened and what is said to have happened; “answers are still just that. Answers. Representations” and so one of my tasks in this project has been to try to allow for the most representative documentation of, and engagement with, human experience without claiming to have uncovered any ‘truths’ or trying to be completely objective (Thompson, 1995, p. 11). As a part of my methodology and the research process in general I have brought particular rational insights to bear on the evidence I have collected. I do understand, however, that there is always the risk of misinterpretation in this part of the research process and it is not my intent to assume that my interpretations of the transcripts are part of any greater ‘truth’.

In writing up, contextualizing and analysing the interview transcripts, I have often raised more questions for myself than I have ‘answered’. If given the opportunity in the future, I would love to follow up with some of the same women, or find a new group of willing interview participants, and ask them some of the questions that arose while I was writing up this project. It would be interesting to conduct longitudinal follow-up interviews in order to see where the young women’s future relationships, and experiences with love, romance and sex, lead them. It would also be interesting to see if, and how, any of their views on love and sex change in the future.

**Future Implications of the Research**

All but one of the girls I spoke with said that they felt uneducated about STIs compared to pregnancy when they were preparing for their first sex. Most of them said that they felt unprepared in general and told me they had little to no sex education in school. Mary said that she had been “taught about the act of reproduction, but never about contraception or acts of sexuality” and hinted that she felt unprepared to discuss things like STIs or pregnancy with a partner. Rachel
told me “abstinence was THE option... I went to a Catholic school” while Bonnie told me her experience with sex-ed was very “bare bones.” Alex remembers talking to her friends about sex-ed and realizing “we didn’t have any”, and Sarah, the only woman who attended an all-girls private school told me “we did have [sex-ed] in elementary school, but I can’t remember how much, not very much. The whole puberty talk didn’t really come until grade 7 and it was so awkward! I went to an all-girls school, and you would think we’d all be pretty comfortable with it, but nope.” This discomfort Sarah remembers feeling might have come from the discomfort of whomever was teaching. As a sexual health educator I wish that only people comfortable teaching the material would be asked to do so.

This thesis has been very useful to me as a sexual health educator; it has taught me a great deal about the actual experiences of young women and their sexual lives, as well as where sex education might be missing the mark. Currently sex education in Ontario is not standardized nor is it required that young people ever even be taught about STIs, pregnancy options, sexual assault, domestic violence, love, heartbreak, or numerous other things that would help young people to make informed decisions about engaging in sexual activity (Smylie, Maticka-Tyndale & Boyd, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2010).

Just last year, for example, an updated document of The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Health and Physical Education, 2010 was released (Ministry of Education, 2010). It was meant to replace the 1998 document of the same name. The document stipulated that “Beginning in September 2010, all health and physical education programs for Grades 1 to 8 will be based on the expectations outlined in this document” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 3). This updated document was to include such topics as masturbation, sexual orientation, and gender identity. After the immediate outcry from some parents and religious leaders, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty decided to scrap the new curriculum after he had initially supported it. September 2010
has come and gone and the updated curriculum has been abandoned. This recent controversy is an excellent example of the existence of both curiosity and fear of adolescent sexuality and helps to demonstrate how moral panics over sexuality might start. The controversy over teaching school-aged children about real sexual health topics like masturbation (which they are currently not mandated to learn about) demonstrates that Nancy Lesko (2001) was right when she suggested that we are maintaining ‘socially young’ adolescents. We are not preparing them for the real world where they will have personal and adult responsibilities and need to make informed decisions. Critics of the new sex education curricula suggested that teaching this information would either “traumatize” the students, or pressure them into “doing everything [they learn] out in the schoolyard” (Hammer & Howlett, 2010). Alexander McKay of the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN) has said that this type of thinking has been shown to be unfounded and he suggests that today’s youth are more knowledgeable about sexual health and so are better prepared to be able to say no if they so choose (Canwest News Service, 2008).

I think it would be useful for researchers to learn more about teenagers’ experiences of sex. In this thesis I have tried to understand one aspect of these experiences: the importance of love for some girls. I think we need to know more about how love can lead to irrational or less safe sexual health practices. Across North America, but in Ontario specifically, sexual health curriculum needs to be updated, standardized, and less stigmatized in order to improve the lives of those young people being educated. It would be interesting to look into privatization and contracting sexual health education out of the school boards to public health workers and those educators who specialize in sexual health, in order to offer the most important information to students, and by educators who are not only informed but who are comfortable with the material.

Sex education is missing the mark when it comes to discussing desire and pleasure with adolescents – this is definitely not a new critique (Smith, 2009; Smylie, Maticka-Tyndale &
Boyd, 2008). Debra Tolman (2002) and Judith Levine (2002) have suggested that it is not only important to include such topics in the educating of young people, but that it is actually harmful not to include them. Researchers who have asked youth what they would like in terms of updated sex education have found that “increased sex education along with clearer information... is needed in the home, the educational environment, and within the health care sector” (Hacker et al, 2000). I believe it is important for sexual health educators to take up the topics of pleasure and desire in the classroom. By teaching young people about pleasure, desire, love, heartbreak, and romance, as well as STIs, pregnancy options, and different sexualities, we might be able to help young people explore and comprehend their sexual selves in safer and more informed ways.

There are still more moral panics springing up around female adolescent sexuality than around male adolescent sexuality (Tolman, 2002; Levy, 2005). There seems to be a cultural fascination with and fear of female sexuality, and numerous contradictory messages from popular culture and the media aimed at creating heteronormative socially appropriate young women (Levy, 2005; Doan & Williams, 2008; Weprin, 2009). How are women to be both innocent and seductive, and why is this something that is encouraged? The gender norms associated with femininity are apparent in most of popular culture: in the clothes characters wear in movies, on television, and in music videos; and in the roles they play as mothers, caregivers, cooks, and housekeepers in many popular shows. New roles, and new sexual scripts for women in shows like Sex and the City now offer girls examples of how some young professional women (i.e., Carrie) might actually avoid the kitchen and housework, and how others might work hard to balance motherhood with a professional career (i.e., Miranda). It would be interesting to follow up with the women I interviewed and see what sorts of roles they have chosen for themselves in, say, ten or twenty years, as it seems like today, even with the sexual double standard, women are (finally?) being offered more options in terms of the gender roles that they choose to take up.
However, although young women today are offered more in terms of sex education, and in popular media and discourses surrounding female sexuality than they may have been in the past, none of these things mean that it is any less difficult to grow up as a woman in a society full of sexual double standards and impossibly contradicting expectations. Women are still not treated as equal to their male counterparts and the feminist project still has a ways to go.

All of the girls I spoke with were influenced by love in their decisions to have sex for the first time. Though there is much concern with teenage sexuality and moral panics over numerous sexuality related topics, the young women I spoke with gave me, and hopefully any parents who might read this, no reason to be concerned that they were part of an over-sexualized youth culture. Only one girl I spoke with, Sarah, seemed to feel comfortable having more casual sex, and that only recently, now that she is in her early twenties and focusing on her career. Much of popular culture and media continues to sexualize the greater culture that shapes teen experiences (if that were even a possibility), so it is important to offer safe(r) sex information if young people so desire it but important to also note that not all girls are participating in this hooking-up culture (Risman & Schwartz, 2002). As researchers Risman & Schwartz (2002) point out, “Not long ago, Victoria’s Secret ads would have been considered soft pornography, and jokes about oral sex would not have been allowed on prime-time TV” (p. 22). It is true, the sexual content on television and in other popular culture outlets has been getting more explicit even if statistics suggest that the reality of teens’ lives have not been following suit; the age of first sex has been fairly consistent for many decades so just because the media is getting more sexualized does not mean that young people are necessarily becoming more sexual at earlier ages (Bouris, 1993; Carpenter, 2005).

It seems that, despite the increase in sexual content in the media, many young women do not value love and romance any less than they might have done fifty years ago. Even Sarah, who
is not focused on finding love at this point in her life, still says she values love highly and I interpreted her views to suggest that she is indeed looking forward to finding love in the future. When she told me about her one “true love”, and wondering whether he might be the one defining relationship of her life, it was clear to me that she hoped she would find more love, especially after she said “I would like to think no [that my relationship with him will not be the only defining relationship in my life] because I want to experience more, and I know there is so much more to experience... Ahhh romance!” (Sarah).

This project has been important in helping me to better understand the reasons and ways love and romance can influence young women’s decisions to have sexual intercourse, especially for the first time. Having the opportunity to talk firsthand with six young women about their personal experiences with love, sex, and romance has helped me to see the complexity, nuance and subjectivity involved in the relationship between young women, sex, love and romance, and to better appreciate the intricate relationships young women experience. I hope my work will be able to benefit others. Parents might worry less knowing some girls have sexual experiences that are way different than those sensationalized in the media. Girls might feel less pressured to become a part of sex party culture if they know that not everyone is participating, and that other girls are also (and still) waiting for love before they have sex. Organizations like Planned Parenthood Toronto, which organized The Toronto Teen Sex Survey to find out what Toronto teens were saying about sexual health, and what services they wanted, might benefit from knowing the value some girls place on love, rather than on empowerment or on casual sex and hooking up. I know that for myself, as a sexual health educator, I plan on making the most of what I have learned here, and on sharing these stories and the insight they gave me on young women’s relationship to love, sex, and romance, with as many young women as I possibly can.
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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Agenda

1) Go over Letter of Information and Consent Form
2) Talk about issues of confidentiality
3) Describe the goals of the project to the participants. Provide a basic description of the experiences that I am trying to understand better (e.g., the influence of romantic love on girls’ first experiences of consensual heterosexual intercourse.).
4) Hand participants discussion topics (see below) and begin discussion on a topic of their interest to find out what the young women think and understand about love and sex and romance.
5) At the end of the interview I will briefly explain Sharon Thompson’s (1995) book *Going all the way* and the ways that my project is similar (e.g., interviewing young women about their experiences with romance, love, and first heterosexual intercourse) and I will ask participants what they think about Thompson’s ideas or my own ideas. Finally, I will ask the young women participating whether they have any questions before we wrap up the interview.

Discussion topics to be covered include:
Just to give me some background, I’m going to ask you a couple of questions about yourself, so:
- Where did you grow up?
- What high school did you go to?
- How old are you?
- How old were you when you had sex for the first time?
- What year are you in here at Queen’s?
- Did you have sex ed in elementary or high school? (Describe briefly what you remember)

Can you tell me a little bit about your history with boys?
- Were you allowed to date as a teenager?
- Did you have crushes?
- Did you date a lot of boys before you had sex?
- What did you think the point was of dating? Were you looking for something in the boys you were dating? If so, what do you remember that to be?

How would you describe or define:
- Romance?
- Love?
  - If there was no word for love, how would you describe it? For instance, how would you tell someone you loved them?

So you said you were ____________ years old when you first had sex...
Can you tell me about the first time you had heterosexual intercourse?
- What did that mean to you? Elaborate.
o What does it mean to you now?
o Was love involved? If so, how?
o Did love lead to sex?
o Was your first sex pre-planned?

Can you explain/describe the negotiations involved in your first sex? So, before you had sex for the first time, what were some of the things you considered in deciding to have sex (if anything at all)?
  o Factors like pregnancy, birth control, STIs, pain, etc
  o Did love factor in?
  o Was it discussed much before it happened?

Did things change in your relationship after you had sex for the first time?
  o If so, how?

Did you and your first sexual partner break up?
  o If not, how long have you been together?
  o If so, how long after you had sex did you break up?
  o Did it hurt to break up?
  o How would you define heartbreak?
  o Would you say that you were heartbroken?
  o If you’ve experienced other break-ups since then, would you say that that first break-up (after having sex for the first time) was harder than other ones?
    • If so, why do you think?
  o If you have had sex with someone since then, how long after you broke up did you wait to have sex again?

If you’ve had other sexual partners since then, how do you understand the relationship between love and sex in other relationships?
  o Has your understanding changed since your first sexual experiences?
    • If so, how?
  o Have the negotiations around having sex for the first time changed with new partners?
    • If so, how?
  o Is having sex for the first time different than having sex with other partners later?
    • If so, how?

When you were younger did you have an idea about love and expectations of it?
  o What specific ideas did you hold about being in love and falling in love?
  o Do you think that your parents/family/friends/media/TV influenced your ideas about love?

Do you think that the way that you use the word love is the same way that others use it?
  o Your partner for instance?

What would you do to show your partner that you loved them?
  o How would they show you?
  o Would sex be a part of any of that?
Can you describe your experience with romance and love?
   o Did/does romance lead to love?
   o Was romance something you desired?
   o Was love?

Thinking about your first experience with sex especially, or other experiences as well:
   If you had to sum up how your own experiences of sex have been influenced by feelings of love how would you explain them?
      o Do you think love is necessary for sex?
      o If you’ve experienced this before, what is the difference between having sex with someone you love and someone you don’t?

How do you think your girl friends might understand the connection between romance and/or love and sex?

What do you the popular perceptions out there right now about love and sex are?
   o What do you think these popular perceptions are influenced by?

How you think the meaning of love has changed during the last fifty years?
   o Do you think you experienced falling in love the same way as older people or younger people?
   o And why do you think that is?

Is love different for men and women?
   o Do you think your partner feels the same things about love that you do?

Do men and women show their love for each other in different ways?

Can you think of any love stories that stick in your mind?
   o If yes, what do you think makes these love stories special?
   o Do you relate to these stories in your own life?

Ok, That just about finishes up this interview.
Right now I’d like to take a second and ask you whether you have anything you’d like to add that I didn’t cover, or anything that you think might be important but that you didn’t get a chance to share yet?
I’d also like to ask whether you have any questions?

Thank you so much for helping with this study. I’m going to type up our interview notes and send them to you if you’d like to see them, and get you to sign a form saying that you approve of the write up and then to just email it back to me.

Feel free to email me if you have any questions that come up about the interview or anything related – and again, thank you so much for participating.
Appendix B

Paul Johnson’s (2005) Interview Guide (pp. 139-142) from which I adapted my own Interview Guide

1. a. Would you say that you have ever been in love?  
b. What were your first experiences of falling in love?  
c. And of being in love?  
d. Did you have ‘crushes’?

2. a. When you were younger did you have an idea about love and expectations of it?  
b. What specific ideas did you hold about being in love and falling in love?  
c. Where do you think you got those ideas?  
d. Do you think that your parents/ family influenced your ideas about love?

3. a. Can you think of any love stories that stick in your mind?  
b. If yes: What do you think makes these love stories special?  
c. Do you relate to these stories in your own life?

4. Was there a first ‘proper’ love relationship in your life?

5. What have been the key experiences of love throughout your life?

6a. How would you define love?  
b. If there was no word for love, how would you describe it? For instance, how would you tell someone you loved them?

7. Are there specific stages of romantic love?  
b. Does love follow a ‘path’? And what are its key stages?  
c. Does love develop in the same way for everyone?

8a. What part does sex play in falling in love and sustaining love?  
b. Do sex and love always go together?  
c. Is this the same for everyone?

d. What is the difference between having sex with someone you love and someone you don’t?

9. a. What do you think of arranged marriages?  
b. Would you ever get married through a marriage arranged by your family?

10. a. Have you ever experienced love at first sight?  
b. Do you think that love at first sight is a good basis for a relationship?  
c. and: why/ why not?

11. a. Would you say you were friends with your partner?  
b. Do you have the same types of conversations, or share the same thoughts, with your partners as with your friends?

12. a. Do you think that the way that you use the word love is the same way that others use it?  
b. Your partner for instance?  
c. What about gay men and lesbians?  
d. How do you imagine love is different in relationships between two men and two women?  
e. Do you think the experience of love would be different or similar?

13. a. Do you think that gays and lesbians should be allowed to get married in the same way as heterosexuals?
b. Why do you think that?
14. a. Would the option of a relationship with someone of the same sex ever have been a possibility for you?
b. Do you think you could ever have been in love with someone of the same sex as yourself?
c. Would that be a possibility for you in the future? d. If so, why/why not?
15. a. Have you always been able to have the type of relationship you would have liked?
b. If so, why or why not?
16. a. What has been your experience (if any) of monogamy?
b. Do you usually want a relationship to be monogamous?
17. a. What are the main differences between being in a romantic relationship with someone and being single?
b. In what key ways has being in a relationship changed your life?
c. Are there any advantages to being single?
d. Do you feel differently about yourself when you are single or in a relationship?
18. a. Can you describe what your ideal relationship would be like?
b. Who would be your ideal partner?
19. Is love an escape from everyday life? Does love take you away from normal daily living?
20. a. If you were going to have a ‘romantic moment’ what would you do?
b. Where do you think it is best to have such a moment?
21. a. Do you spend ‘quality’ time with your partner?
b. Do you think it is important to talk about your feelings with your partner? Do they do that with you?
c. Are there activities you only do with your partner, and other things you do with your friends?
22. a. Do you think the meaning of love has changed during the last fifty years?
b. How, and in what kind of ways?
c. Do you think you experienced falling in love in the same way as A: older people (your parents) or B: younger people (your children)?
d. And: why do you think that is?
23. a. Some people say that the idea of falling in love with one person, and staying together for life, is ‘old fashioned’ – what do you think?
b. Was it more common in the past to stay together for life do you think? And why?
c. Is marriage important to you?
24. a. Some people have said that it is too easy to get a divorce or split up from your partner now – what do you think?
b. Was it more difficult in the past, and was that a good or bad thing?
c. Why was it more difficult? d. Why do people separate so much these days?
25. a. There is a lot of debate about people having a ‘traditional courtship’ in a relationship and waiting until they are married before they have sex – what do you think about this?
b. Do you think you are more or less traditional?
c. How would you describe a traditional courtship?
26. a. How would you describe your class background?
b. Do you think your class background has played a part in your experience of a relationship?
c. What do you think the effects of a person’s background are in terms of being in love?
d. Do you think that people need to have similar backgrounds to be able to have a successful relationship?

e. Do you think that if people love each other they can have a relationship regardless of their backgrounds and each others’ families?

f. What would happen if people had different backgrounds and had a relationship?

g. Is class less important now than in the past? Why?

27. If you wanted to listen to some romantic music what would you listen to? What record/CD would you put on?

28. If you were going to buy someone a gift to tell them you were in love with them what would it be?

29. a. Have you ever celebrated Valentine’s Day? What did you do?
   b. Do you celebrate Valentine’s Day now? What did you do last time?

30. a. Is love different for men and women?
   b. Do you think your partner feels the same things about love that you do?

31. a. Do you think that living together with your partner has (or would) affect your feelings for each other?
   b. If you live together: how is your house work organized? Do you have a set routine of household tasks?

32. a. What do you (what would you) like least about living with your partner?
   b. What aspect of your relationship would you most like to change?

33. a. Do men and women show their love for each other in different ways?
   b. What would you do to show your partner that you loved them?
   c. How would they show you?
Appendix C

Recruitment Email/ Ad

Recruitment email sent to potential participants and ad to be posted in JDUC and ARC public posting spaces:

Subject: Seeking Participants for Research Project on Young Women and Sexuality

Hello,

Are you an undergraduate woman interested in sharing the story of your first romantic feelings and the influence of those feelings on your decision to have heterosexual intercourse for the first time?

I am seeking participants for my study called “The influence of romantic love on girls’ first experiences of consensual heterosexual intercourse.” Participation would require you to attend a brief meeting (approx. 10 minutes) on Queen’s campus or over the phone to determine your availability and desire to participate and then an individual interview (approx. 45-90 minutes) in Kingston. You may choose the time and location for the interview. The study will create data for my Master’s thesis in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen’s University.

I am interested in looking at the influence of feelings of romantic love on some young women’s decisions to engage in consensual heterosexual intercourse. The project is intended to help sexual health educators to gain a better understanding of some of the complexities in young women’s experiences with romance, sexuality and relationships and to consider the ways that these understandings may have changed over the past two or three decades.

If you think you might be interested in finding out more about this project, please contact me at the email below. If you know anyone who you think might be interested, please forward/show this recruitment ad to them. I will send interested participants a letter which explains the project and I will arrange to speak with you either in person or over the phone to discuss the project and to see if you would be willing to participate in it.

Thank you,

Natalie Jacox
3nj1@queensu.ca
M.A. Candidate
Queen’s University
Appendix D

Letter of Information

This research is being conducted by Natalie Jacox under the supervision of Dr. Mary Louise Adams, in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario.

What is this study about?
The goal of this project is to understand the influence of romantic love on some girls’ first experiences of consensual heterosexual intercourse. The findings from this study will be used by myself, the researcher, to learn how to provide sexual health education based on young women’s experiences. The study will also help sex educators more generally to better understand the influence of romantic love on girls’ decisions to engage in heterosexual intercourse as well as to give a better understanding of the potential impact and influence that heartbreak can have on young women. The study will require you to attend a short meeting or to speak with me on the phone to assess your desire to participate (approximately 10 minutes), and then to participate in an interview (approximately 45 – 90 minutes) which will be voice recorded. There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with this study. There are also no direct benefits to participating in this study.

Is my participation voluntary?
Yes. You may choose not to answer any of the questions you are asked. You may withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences. If you would like to withdraw, please let Natalie Jacox know by email at 3nj1@queensu.ca or phone 613 – 541 – 8058. Should you withdraw, any information that you have contributed to the study will be destroyed unless you give permission otherwise.

Where and when will the study take place?
The interview will take place at a time and location in Kingston, Ontario that is convenient and comfortable for you. After participating in the interview, a copy of your transcribed interview will be sent to you via email and you will have the opportunity to approve and clarify what you have said. You will also have the opportunity to remove any data that you have contributed.

What will happen to my responses?
Your responses in the interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Once the transcripts are made, the digital recordings will be erased. On the transcripts and in the analysis and data write up, you will be referred to only by pseudonym (a fake name) to protect your privacy (see consent form). All contact information and data provided to me by participants in the study will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office in Kingston, Ontario. Only my supervisor and myself will have access to the data. I will delete all electronic files related to the interviews two years after the completion of the research (August, 2010) and will store the data on my password protected computer until that time. The data from this project may be published in professional journals or presented at academic conferences, but such presentations will not breach your confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.
Will I be compensated for my participation?
No financial compensation will be provided.

What if I have concerns?
In the event that you have any complaints, concerns, or questions about this research, please feel free to contact Natalie Jacox, 3nj1@queensu.ca; project supervisor, Dr. Mary Louise Adams mla1@queensu.ca; Director of School of Kinesiology and Health Studies, Dr. Jean Coté (613-533-3054); or, the Chair of the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson (613-533-6288).

Thank-you. Your interest in participating in this research study is greatly appreciated.
Appendix E

Consent Form

“The influence of romantic love on girls’ first experiences of consensual heterosexual intercourse”

Name (please print clearly): __________________________________________________________

1. I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that I will be participating in the study called “The influence of romantic love on girls’ first experiences of consensual heterosexual intercourse.” I understand that this means that I will be asked to meet briefly (approximately 10 minutes) with the researcher or to talk with her over the phone so that we can decide whether I am eligible for the study and whether I’m interested in participating. If so, I will be asked to meet for an interview and to talk about how I understand my experiences and my decisions to engage for the first time in heterosexual intercourse (approximately 45-90 minutes). I understand that I will also have the opportunity to read over and approve my transcript from the interview.
3. I understand that the interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder.
4. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may choose not to answer any of the questions I am asked. I may withdraw at any time with no adverse effects. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data now and in the future. Only my pseudonym will be used in the transcripts and write up. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at academic conferences, but such presentations will not breach my confidentiality. Should I be interested, I am entitled to a copy of the findings.
5. I am aware that if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints, I may contact Natalie Jacox (613-541-8058), 3nj1@queensu.ca; project supervisor, Dr. Mary Louise Adams (613-533-6000 x74723); mla1@queensu.ca; Director of School of Kinesiology and Health Studies, Dr. Jean Coté (613-533-3054), or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson (613-533-6288); at Queen’s University.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this research:

If you would like to choose your own pseudonym, please enter it here:
________________________________________________________

If you do not choose your own pseudonym, one will be provided for you.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ________________________
Appendix F

Screening Meeting Guide

I will meet with women who respond to my recruitment notices, on Queen’s campus or over the phone, in order to determine their suitability. Suitability to participate in my study will be based on:

- Age (must be between 18-23 years)
- Whether their first experiences with sexual intercourse were,
  - Consensual
  - Heterosexual
  - Influenced by or occurred within a romantic relationship

I will ask participants, based on the suitability criteria, whether they believe they are suitable, and whether they still want to volunteer to participate after we have discussed the project.

If participants decide they do want to participate, I will go over the letter of information and the consent form and answer any questions the women might have. I will inform them of their right to withdraw, with no negative consequences, at any time during the study, and we will decide on a future time and location to meet that is convenient for them in order to conduct the interview.
Appendix G

Counseling Services Available in Kingston

Although the participants in my project will have experienced consensual first intercourse, my project will still involve sensitive/personal issues which can always leave a psychological/emotional risk. In the event that there is actual emotional risk of any of the participants I will be able to use my counselling skills from the Sexual Health Resource Centre and I will also be able to refer any of my participants to a number of counselling services in the community. Here is a list (arranged alphabetically) that I will provide to all participants indicating that if they feel upset by anything that came up in the interview they can contact any of the services listed below.

Assaulted Women’s Helpline – 1-888-863-0511 (Open 24/7)

Frontenac Community Mental Health Services – 613-544-4229 (Open 24/7)

KFLA Health Unit – Sexual Health Clinic - 221 Portsmouth Ave, Kingston, Ontario – 613-549-1232

Kingston General Hospital (KGH) – 76 Stuart Street – Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Team and Emergency Room – 613-548-2333 (Open 24/7)

Ontario Sexual Health Helpline – 1-800-668-2437

Queen’s Sexual Health Resource Centre (SHRC) – Referral Services – JDUC, room 223, Kingston, Ontario – 613-533-2959

Queen’s Student Health Services – Counselling and Health Services – LaSalle Building, 146 Stuart St, Kingston, Ontario – 613-533-2506

Sexual Assault Centre Kingston (SACK) – 613-544-6424 (Open 24/7)

Telehealth Ontario – 1-866-797-0000 (Open 24/7)

Women’s Clinic Kingston – 613-548-2423
Appendix H

Coding Details

Reading through the transcripts I created themes by locating keywords. The main keywords I used were: love, heartbreak, romance, trading sex (for love), media, *Sex and the City* (and any other media references), first sex, casual sex, hooking-up, sex education, moral panics, friends, boyfriend, pain, pleasure, desire, enjoyment.

I grouped all of the definitions together and created a separate document with all of the definitions for love grouped together, all of the definitions for heartbreak and all of the definitions for romance. I used this document as a quick reference to find all of the young women’s separate definitions of these important (key)words.

Once I had located the keywords in each of the transcripts, I pulled out the question and answer that the keyword occurred in. Anytime that the same questions led to similar keywords being used, I grouped the same questions together. I created a separate word document with these ‘keyword’ interview questions and further grouped them by speaker so that each of the six girls had certain keyword themed quotes that I could easily refer back to.
Appendix I

Ethics Approval

May 10, 2010

Dear [Name],

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB) has reviewed and approved your project entitled "The Influence of Romantic Love on Girls' First Experiences of Consensual Heterosexual Intercourse" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCG) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCG) and Senate Terms of Reference (article 61), your project has been cleared for a period of one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed or if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse events that occur during this period (details available on web page: http://www.queensu.ca/research/researchethics/adverseeventreportform.htm - Adverse Event Report Form). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or an unexpected event that affects the level of risk for the research or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach or to participants. You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementation of new interventions to the study procedures in the GREB Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/research/researchethics/researchethicschangeform.htm - Research Ethics Change Form. These changes must be sent to the Irving Coordinator, Dr. Irving, in the Office of Research Services or Irving/Research prior to implementation. This form will be used to request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and for the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Jane Stevenson, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

Dr. Mary Louise Adams, Chair, Unit REB
Dr. Mary Louise Adams, Faculty Adviser
Kate Blandford, Action Support