Persistent Pleasures: Agency, Social Power, and Embodiment in Women's Solitary Masturbation Experiences

Christin P. Bowman

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PERSISTENT PLEASURES: AGENCY, SOCIAL POWER, AND EMBODIMENT IN WOMEN’S SOLITARY MASTURBATION EXPERIENCES

by

CHRISTIN P. BOWMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Agency, Social Power, and Embodiment in Women’s Solitary Masturbation Experiences

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Persistent Pleasures:

Agency, Social Power, and Embodiment in Women’s Solitary Masturbation Experiences

by

Christin P. Bowman

Advisor: Deborah L. Tolman

Though sexuality has historically been a useful site for examinations of social power, looking at power through the lens of sexuality often involves interpersonal analyses. But social power can also inform solitary experiences through the internalization of social norms and discourses. In this dissertation, I move beyond explorations of how people interact sexually with one another, and instead investigate women’s solitary masturbation experiences throughout their lives as a means to better understand the intricate ways in which sexist, racist, and heterosexist ideologies weave themselves into women’s bodies and lives. Specifically, I ask the following research question in this dissertation: How (in what ways and by what means) do social power and embodied knowledge interact to inform women’s solitary masturbation experiences?

I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty adult women (Mean age = 30) in which I asked women to tell me stories about their solitary masturbation experiences throughout their lives. Because solitary masturbation is an activity that women may engage in without ever needing to put language to their experiences, participants first completed a card-sorting task, in which they sorted a stack of cards, each with one statement about women’s masturbation on it,
into a distribution that ranged from “most disagree” to “most agree.” This procedure had the dual purpose of providing participants with examples of language used to discuss masturbation to aid in their articulation of their experiences, and also of giving participants “permission” to think about the topic in whatever way felt right to them. After completing the sorting task, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants. Following transcription of the audio-recorded interviews, I used a combination of thematic and narrative analyses to examine my research question.

Women talked about their solitary masturbation experiences in ways that illuminate the complicated braiding of oppressive social discourses, embodied sensations, and willful subjectivities. Though many women talked about experiences of confusion, shame, and silencing, they also often explicitly rejected negative messages about masturbation, and endeavored to learn more about their bodies and their pleasures. Some women described solitary masturbation experiences in childhood that appeared to have taken place before the participant knew that her activity had a name and a social meaning. These experiences sound very different from those participants talked about happening later in life, in that these childhood experiences seem not to be informed by social discourses – they appear to be extra-discursive experiences. Those who narrated these experiences also described various ways in which they entered into language and discourse, including sudden realizations (e.g., “Oh, that’s what I’ve been doing!”) and more gradual ones, but in both cases, participants came to recognize their behavior as sexual and laden with social meanings. I found that alongside the traditional feminist project of including women’s experiences within language as a means to political liberation, language can play a different role; as seemed to be the case in women’s childhood extra-discursive masturbation experiences, sometimes a lack of language can provide people with the cognitive
space to explore an experience without the constraints of discourse. I also found that even though women may masturbate in physical isolation, relational others are never far beneath the surface of their psyches, and women may be socially expected to concern themselves with relational others even regarding their solitary eroticism (and this pattern holds true both for queer and heterosexual women). Perhaps most importantly, my findings suggest that women are often agentic and determined explorers of their own bodies and experiences; even in the midst of social stigma, women consistently maintain their curiosity, and listen to the embodied wisdom within.
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I never could have completed this dissertation without the love and support of my wife, Sarah Bowman. Sarah is understanding, loving, humble, and brilliant. She is my go-to thought partner because she can sift through nonsense and find the crux of the ideas I play with better than anyone I know. Colleagues can attest that I bring her up constantly, not just because I love her, but also because she is usually the one I thought something through with and it is thanks to her brain that mine is what it is. For standing by my side through thick and thin, never wavering in her loyalty and belief in me, I dedicate this dissertation to her.

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who has always dreamed big for me, and my brother and sister-in-law Mike and Sara Siegele, who have never shied away from the big questions. My inherited Bowman family also has always shown their support: Kathe Corbett, Gary Bowman, Meghan Bowman, and Caitlin Bowman – thank you for making me one of your own. And the countless hours I spent writing at home were made infinitely more manageable by my sweet cats, José and Pedro. Finally, my friends, near and far, have cheered me on throughout this process. Thanks to Kristie Timber, Melissa Heller Seid & Shoshana Seid, Kelsey Jones, Chelsea Gross, Megan Myers, Diana Callaghan, Stephanie Johnson, Ryan Brewer, and Jesse & Amy Burne.

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Chapter One: Introduction
Background and Research Questions

Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know, but not a single human being can be taught to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe or you know, you’re a lot of other people: but the moment you feel, you’re nobody-but-yourself.

To be nobody-but-yourself – in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else – means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.

–E. E. Cummings, *A Poet’s Advice to Students*, 1955

I believed, and still do, that our bodies are our selves, that my soul is the voltage conducted through neurons and nerves, and that my spirit is my flesh.

–Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 2015

Subjectivity is hard work. People strive every day to make sense of their lives, their experiences, and themselves within a turbulent sea of social norms and ideologies. As E.E. Cummings suggests, these strong currents bend us toward conformity; humans are social creatures who watch each other, imitate each other, monitor each other; each individual truly is “a lot of other people.” But the story of humanity is more complicated than this. While human subjects may float along on the waves of “everybody else,” they also are determined to swim, to splash, to dive. They are not just subjects, but willful subjects (Ahmed, 2014), who question and critique and disobey. And though they may continue to feel and respond to the forces of the social world around them, willful subjects also look within. They know, as Ta-Nehisi Coates
does, that their “bodies are [them] selves” and that who they are – their very “soul” – is made up of “the voltage conducted through neurons and nerves.” Subjectivity is the challenging human process of navigating these often competing forces. And while I (and others) might take issue with Cummings’ assertion that a subject can ever truly be “nobody-but-[them]self,” willful subjects “never stop fighting” to listen to that electric and adamant embodied wisdom within.

In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which women, as willful subjects, navigate the forces of their social worlds and their embodied sensations by focusing on a solitary sexual act – masturbation. I examine power – both social power and individual experiences of feeling powerful – so as to better understand what power looks like, what power does, and how power works when women experience their sexualities in physical solitude. While sexuality has historically been a useful site of investigation for inquiries into power (e.g., Foucault, 1978), looking at power through the lens of sexuality has often involved interpersonal analyses: How do institutional structures like marriage, for instance, inform what sexual behaviors or partnerships are deemed acceptable? Why do people opt to use contraception (or not) and how do gender norms restrict these decisions? How do economies of pleasure regulate sexual encounters?

But power is not only an interpersonal practice. Power “comes from everywhere” and describes a complicated system of relations in a particular context (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). Social psychological theory and research suggest that even during a physically solitary sexual behavior, social norms and discourses – the expectations and ideologies that work to maintain social power through language and communication (Foucault, 1982; see more below) – are nevertheless present in women’s psyches (Burkitt, 2010; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson, 2010; Coates borrows this language from the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective’s (1970/2011) classic volume, Our Bodies, Ourselves.
I examine power through the lens of sexuality to move beyond explorations of how people interact sexually with one another, and instead investigate how people internalize social norms about sexuality (Bartky, 1990) and willfully listen to the wisdom of their bodies (Ahmed, 2014; Lorde, 1984) when they are physically alone. Furthermore, because women’s, and in particular, women of color’s and queer women’s, sexualities have been historically subjugated (Bartky, 1990; Butler, 1990; Collins, 2000, 2005), I examine diverse women’s experiences of solitary masturbation to attempt to make visible the complicated ways sexist, racist, and heterosexist ideologies weave themselves into women’s bodies and lives (Spronk, 2014).

Most researchers do not define “masturbation” in their work, and indeed, like trying to define orgasm (e.g., Lloyd, 2005), defining masturbation is difficult. In order to provide my participants and myself the cognitive freedom to think about masturbation in diverse and unexpected ways, my definition of solitary masturbation is intentionally broad. For the purposes of this dissertation, I define solitary masturbation as any stimulation a person provides herself in physical isolation that results in feelings of sexual arousal and/or pleasure. This stimulation may be genital, but may also involve any part of a person’s body, and may or may not include the use of masturbatory aids. It also may or may not result in orgasm or be orgasm-focused. For more on how I define masturbation, see my definition of the term in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender* (Bowman, in press).

Women’s solitary masturbation is a behavior that remains stigmatized in Western societies (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Tiefer, 1998), and this stigma may be related to the subordination of women’s sexuality in general. Historically, women’s sexuality has been socially defined in terms of men; it is constructed as functional and primarily for the purposes of reproduction and/or male sexual pleasure (Rich, 1980). Such definitions are external
to and imposed upon women’s subjective and embodied experiences. If a woman need not feel pleasure, desire or anything at all in her body in order to procreate or satisfy a male partner, then her lived embodiment appears to be socially irrelevant. Furthermore, a cultural silence surrounds women’s masturbation such that school boards are loath to include the topic in sex education curricula (e.g., Ormsby, 2013), parents are unlikely to discuss it at home (e.g., Hogarth & Ingham, 2009), and media representations of masturbation portray men at a rate three times that of women (Madanikia et al., 2013). Though child development experts recognize that children of all ages masturbate, and that this activity is healthy and expected (Mallants & Casteels, 2008), parents and schools rarely discuss masturbation with children (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013), and when they do, they may discourage it, especially in the case of girls (Gagnon, 1985). In such a context, it might be predicted that girls and women would deprioritize knowledge of their own pleasure-producing anatomy as well as their embodied sensations. But despite this stigma, the majority of American women do masturbate (e.g., Herbenick et al., 2010). I wonder: how is it that even in the face of such stigma and silence, girls and women nevertheless find their way to their bodies?

Perhaps part of the answer lies in the ways women navigate the complicated entanglement of social power and embodied knowledge. Sara Ahmed (2014) proposes that as willful subjects, people can and do resist the social forces that would determine their paths for them. Being willful means being “perversion” (p. 12) and “deviant” (p. 9) and “disobedient” (p. 10); it means refusing to conform, and persisting toward a “wayward” goal (p. 13) even in the face of consequences. Women who masturbate insist on the validity of their own subjective embodied experiences. They navigate the norms and ideologies that their social worlds present them with, all the while refusing to ignore what they know in their bodies. And while this type of
power-from-within may represent a form of resistance to the social power that would stigmatize them, perhaps more importantly, it showcases the resilience and adamancy of women’s own embodied wisdom.

Attending to women’s subjectivity while investigating a behavior that occurs when women are physically alone makes dominant social discourses particularly apparent. When women narrate their masturbation experiences, they draw on perceived norms and discourses to explain themselves. For instance, as some of the only researchers to date who have explored women’s subjective experiences of masturbation, Fahs and Frank (2014) found that many women described their experiences and what those experiences meant to them in terms of internalized suppositions of what they believed constituted “normal” masturbation. That is, while describing their own experiences, women often deferred to the perceived experiences of others, thereby defining their own experiences at least partially in terms of broader social understandings and even in terms of specific others (e.g., their partners). By examining the ways women utilize the social in order to explain the personal, I glimpse the ways social power becomes internalized, embodied, and reproduced/resisted in a non-physically relational sexual behavior – masturbation. The following research question drives this project:

How (in what ways and by what means) do social power and embodied knowledge interact to inform women’s solitary masturbation experiences? Social power exerts its influence on people in part through the normalization of certain ideologies or discourses. Though researchers have begun to explore the interplay between such discourses and women’s subjective experiences of solitary masturbation (e.g., Fahs & Frank, 2014), we know little about how these forces get braided together. By asking women to talk about their masturbation experiences throughout their lives and listening to what they say, I seek to better understand not just how
women’s narratives reflect social norms, but also how women utilize their embodied sensations to willfully interpret their experiences in this context. I ask, what are women telling me about their willful subjectivity? How are women living the complexity of a world that is both forcefully social and deeply embodied?

In the remainder of this introduction, I provide a theoretical and historical contextualization of women’s solitary masturbation experiences. I begin by clarifying the terms I use throughout this dissertation including an overview of social power and discourse, epistemologies of ignorance, and two complementary understandings of embodiment. I then provide a historical account of Western thought and scholarship on women’s masturbation, which contains the seeds of current social discourses that I detail in the following section. Having laid out the historical social contexts of women’s solitary masturbation, I then explore the ways in which such social norms get under the skin by examining the mechanisms of socially inscribed embodiment. The notion that our social world can regulate individual bodies and minds begs the question as to whether individuals can be free from or resist such regulation, and so in the sections that follow, I discuss these possibilities in terms of “extra-discursive” experiences, willful subjectivities, and lived embodiment. Finally, I provide an overview of the current state of the research literature on women’s and girls’ masturbation as a final piece of the contextual puzzle in which this dissertation rests.

Theoretical and Historical Foundations

Language, discourse and power. People’s experiences and attitudes toward themselves are closely intertwined with the social worlds in which they live (Burr, 2015; Cooley, 1902; Gergen, 1985; Mead, 1934/1962). In a continual, reciprocal, and often unconscious process,
people and communities “construct” their social worlds (e.g., by collectively determining certain behaviors “normal” and others “deviant”), their social worlds also “construct” them (e.g., by compelling individuals to conform to cultural definitions of “normal”). This perspective, known broadly as social constructionism, maintains that the relationships between people and their environments is co-constitutive (Burr, 2015; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934/1962) and constantly evolving; as cultural conditions change historically, so too do people’s understandings of the world and themselves (Gergen, 1973; 1985). Social constructionists argue that people come to understand the world and their experiences in socially prescribed terms at least in part through the acquisition and deployment of language (Lacan, 1966/2002; Whorf, 1939/1956; Vygotsky, 1987). Words themselves are not neutral; they are imbued with socially constructed meanings, and these meanings perform normalizing and regulating functions to uphold systems of power (Foucault, 1978).

Michel Foucault (1982) calls these linguistic regulatory mechanisms discourses, and he argues that they are powerful: “Relationships of communication imply finalized activities (even if only the correct putting into operation of elements of meaning) and, by virtue of modifying the field of information between partners, produce effects of power” (p. 787). In other words, language – and, by extension, discourse – is the method by which people communicate meaning and knowledge to one another; it is how people make meaning for themselves, and the method by which larger systems of social power are maintained. Because the meanings imbued by

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2 For example, the word “beautiful” describes something that is aesthetically pleasing to look at, but defining “aesthetically pleasing” is subjective, and depends on sociocultural values. Labeling something or someone as “beautiful” has cultural weight. Since “beautiful” is valued as (among other things) “good” in Western society, the word is also a mechanism of social power, inciting individuals to modify themselves or their surroundings so as to align with the culturally produced definition of “beautiful.” In this way, language and the meanings associated with words work to regulate the behavior and attitudes of individuals, and are thus mechanisms of social power.
language are socially constructed and colored by social values, individual people’s thoughts and behaviors are perpetually informed and regulated by these discursive systems of power.

Discourses do not simply provide people with words and meanings to articulate experiences – they also modify the very nature of those experiences through regulatory mechanisms (Foucault, 1977). According to social constructionists, experiences are not “pure” and do not simply await naming; instead, experiences are constructed socially through an endless enmeshment of embodied perception and discursive meaning (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994). Two complimentary theories of embodiment explain how people’s bodily experiences are related to the societies in which they live: socially inscribed embodiment and lived embodiment.

Briefly, socially inscribed embodiment refers to the ways in which social norms become internalized and reproduced by individuals, often on an unconscious level, in a process evocative of a sign being inscribed onto a stone (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Foucault, 1978). Lived embodiment refers to the sensations and perceptions one experiences within her body (Grosz, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This latter theoretical tradition conceptualizes the body as an integral part of subjectivity and therefore not separate from the mind (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Together, these embodiment theories situate people’s experiences of their bodies within broader social norms and dominant discourses, allowing researchers to examine phenomena such as women’s sexuality in social and historical context (more detail on these two forms of embodiment below).

Because language is not neutral, learning language is a social process that has a profound effect on an individual’s psyche (Cain, 1993; Foucault, 1988; Lacan, 1966/2002; Vygotsky, 1987). Developmental psychologists like Lev Vygotsky (1962; 1987) and Erica Burman (2008) argue that thought and language are so intimately intertwined that they produce and constitute
one another: “Speech does not merely serve as the expression of developed thought. Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. It is not expressed but completed in the word” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 251). For Vygotsky, learning language is a part of how people learn to think within a particular social context, and so rather than words simply representing the thoughts an individual has independently, words inform and “complete” thoughts. Thoughts become “inner speech” (Vygotsky, 1962), and therefore can never be independent from the social meanings associated with them.

Once a person has access to the words and meanings that structure a society, she forever after understands her perceptions of her experiences through a discursive lens. Foucault (1988) calls this historically and culturally produced way of understanding oneself and one’s experiences “technologies of the self,” and claims that within particular societies, individuals develop particular ways (technologies) of looking at and constructing themselves. For example, technologies of self-surveillance and self-discipline help individuals align themselves with the expectations of dominant discourses, and people are accordingly rewarded for compliance and punished or excluded for nonconformity. This regulation thus creates subjects whose perceptions of their experiences are always already filtered through discourse (Foucault, 1977, 1978).

**Women’s solitary masturbation as an epistemology of ignorance.** Foucault (1980) argues that knowledge and power are forever locked into a mutually reinforcing system: knowledge is always a practice of power, and power is always a function of knowledge. He calls this idea *power/knowledge*, and contends that language and discourse are the means through which power/knowledge operates. Nancy Tuana (2004), takes up this construct to explore the

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3 Not all discourses are dominant. *Dominant* discourses are discourses that reinforce established hegemonic institutions of power. For example, dominant discourses can reinforce sexist, racist, and/or homophobic institutions.
ways in which power/knowledge may work, not only by regulating what individuals know, but also what they do not know, or are kept from knowing. In her theory of an *epistemology of ignorance*, Tuana flips Foucault’s notion on its head, calling for an investigation into the ways that social power is often maintained through the active production of ignorance. Ignorance, she argues, is more than just an absence of knowledge. It is a socially constructed mechanism of social power that is actively maintained and disseminated through institutional forces, and works to privilege some and oppress others.

Though more and more information is available to women about masturbation (see below), girls in particular receive very little direct and accurate information about their bodies’ capacity for sexual pleasure (Fields, 2008; Fine, 1988), or about solitary masturbation in particular (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013). Girls are rarely taught about their sexual anatomy outside the realm of reproduction (Fields, 2008), and in particular, the clitoris – which, importantly, is the only known anatomical structure (male or female) with the sole purpose of providing pleasure – is frequently under-referenced and misrepresented in textbooks (Tuana, 2004). Adults rationalize this refusal to educate girls in terms of *protection* and the maintenance of *innocence* (Robinson, 2012), but it amounts to a context of immense silence and silencing. When U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders suggested in 1994 that masturbation “perhaps should be taught” in schools, Dr. Elders was forced to resign amid bipartisan uproar (Jehl, 1994; more on this below). Today, the country remains deeply divided on issues of sex education, with only 22 states requiring sex education to be taught in public schools, and just 19 requiring that their curriculums be medically accurate (NCSL, 2015). When these programs are administered, they often position girls as potential victims of boys’ apparently unrelenting sex drives (Fields, 2008), construct Black and Latina
girls as particularly “at-risk” for negative sexual outcomes (Garcia, 2012), and tend to use scare tactics to stress the dangers and potential consequences of sexual activity (Fields, 2008; Fine & McClelland, 2006). Positive portrayals of girls’ pleasure and desire appear to generally still be missing (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006).

Additionally, Abstinence Only Until Marriage sex education curricula, which, despite overwhelming evidence of their ineffectiveness, have received hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding since 1981 (SIECUS, 2011), tend to portray sexual pleasure as dangerous, addictive, and difficult to control (Lamb, Graling, & Lustig, 2011). These programs encourage girls and boys to avoid sexual pleasure because an experience of pleasure could lead to sexual intercourse (Lamb et al., 2011). This institutionalized educational rhetoric constructs sexual pleasure, especially for girls, girls of color, and queer girls, as a treacherous force that can ruin lives, and thus aims to make students wary of their own embodied sensations. If sexual pleasure feels good, but is actually bad, then what one feels in one’s body cannot be trusted. Here, an epistemology of ignorance (Tuana, 2004) intersects with a dominant discourse, such that the dominant discourse – the idea that women’s sexual pleasure is dangerous – justifies the maintenance of ignorance. Because sexual pleasure is constructed as a dangerous and
uncontrollable force driving girls to ruin (dominant discourse), they are advised not to feel, learn about, or know their own sexual pleasure (ignorance).

Such a restricted educational context constitutes an epistemology of ignorance (Tuana, 2004). It is not the case that scholars and/or members of society do not know that women and girls possess a great capacity for sexual desire and pleasure; on the contrary, such knowledge has been recorded for centuries (see below), and women’s sexual desire and pleasure has often been thought to surpass that of men (Ellis, 1913/1925; Tuana, 2004). And it is not the case that scholars and/or members of society do not know that many women and girls masturbate and that

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4 This type of intersection works to rationalize the exclusion of myriad topics in sex education curricula, including, but not limited to, masturbation. For example, in a recent Omaha Public Schools meeting in Nebraska, the school board and community members could not agree about whether to include information about sexual orientation and gender identity in 7th and 8th grade sex education curricula. One community member alleged that such a curriculum “rapes children of their innocence” (AP, 2016), and also explained that though she believed children need an education, the proposed curriculum “gives children too much information” (Mazza, 2016). It is in such statements that an epistemology of ignorance is exposed. The accuracy of the information is not being questioned here, but rather the amount and type of information for this particular audience. Children are constructed as too “innocent” to gain this knowledge, and teaching children such topics is constructed as a form of violence (Robinson, 2012). Other recent sex education debates have addressed pleasure more directly. The Illinois legislature passed a bill in 2013 requiring that school districts that choose to provide sex education must present medically accurate information. Critics of the bill contended that it “forces obscene sexual ideas on the school children of Illinois” such as that “masturbation would be taught as normal” (Ormsby, 2013). Equating sex education with obscenity constructs the gaining of this knowledge as dangerous, and masturbation in particular as a risky topic. The solution proposed by these critics is to actively maintain a certain level of ignorance among young people. Withholding information is seen as virtuous and as a means of protecting “innocent” students (Robinson, 2012). In this way, ignorance about girls’ and women’s capacity to provide themselves with autonomous sexual pleasure is actively constructed, maintained, and disseminated (Tuana, 2004), producing an epistemology of ignorance about women’s masturbation.

5 Some countries provide sexuality education curricula that are holistic, critical, and affirming, rather than focused on risk. For instance, New Zealand provides standards for sexuality education that include culturally sensitive and inclusive instruction about a broad array of relevant topics including gender socialization, sexual orientation, gender identity, healthy relationships, pleasure, reproductive health, and much more (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015).
masturbation is safe and pleasurable; Kinsey (1953) empirically solidified this information more than half a century ago. Rather, because women’s seeking of autonomous sexual pleasure does not conform to the traditional functional definitions of women’s sexuality—reproduction and/or male sexual pleasure (Rich, 1980)—and because girls are constructed as innocent and in need of protection (Robinson, 2012), this knowledge is seen as a dangerous threat to this patriarchal order (e.g., Vance, 1989; Weitz, 1989), and is actively suppressed by society.

**Brief history of thought and scholarship on women’s masturbation.** Women’s masturbation (and men’s masturbation) has been a subject of interest and concern for centuries. Current conceptualizations of women’s masturbation are greatly informed by the ways in which the topic has been understood, researched, and regulated historically, and traces of these historical ideas remain within the social ideologies and discourses that still regulate women’s sexualities and self-pleasures today. Therefore, I offer a brief review of the history of Western thought and scholarship on women’s masturbation, tracing the flow of social regulation of the behavior from religion to medicine to psychology to the self. Of particular note is the persistent idea throughout history that women’s masturbation is dangerous, excessive, and a threat to the social order; this notion weaves its way throughout this history, emerging in both moral and economic forms. The historical seeds of Adrienne Rich’s (1980) idea that women’s sexuality is socially constructed in terms of men (reproduction and/or male sexual pleasure) can also be found here in the religious proscriptions concerning masturbation, as can the antecedents of what Foucault (1977, 1988) would later call self-surveillance. And importantly, over the course of

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6 Several scholars have written thorough histories of masturbation, and rather than attempt to replicate their work, I borrow heavily from three main sources, curating the information in this section according to its relevance to my project. These sources are Laqueur (2003), Stengers & Van Neck (2001), and Maines (1999).
time, there arises a tension between an oppressive epistemology of ignorance surrounding masturbation and women’s individual willful subjectivities.

Stimulation of women’s genitalia was advocated as a cure for women’s “hysteria” – an ambiguous and historically malleable disorder of the womb – at least since the second century AD. Soranus of Ephesus described, “We … moisten these parts freely with sweet oil, keeping it up for some time” (as quoted in Maines, 1999, p. 23). Similarly, the third century physician, Galen, describes a detailed genital massage therapy for women suffering from hysteria, and physicians during the Renaissance recommended marital copulation as the best remedy (Maines, 1999). However, women were not advised to massage their own genitals, and by the Middle Ages, erotic self-stimulation was prohibited in both men and women by the Catholic Church along with any other sexual activity that was not explicitly in service to reproduction (Chalker, 2000; Laqueur, 2003). Religious restrictions on masturbation stemmed from the Bible’s Old Testament story of Onan, who “spills his seed” against God’s wishes. But a closer examination of this story reveals that it does not actually forbid masturbation. It describes a man interrupting coitus by pulling out before ejaculation, not a man who ejaculates as a result of self-stimulation (Chalker, 2000; Stengers & Van Neck, 2001). And in any case, the story of Onan upon which much religious resistance to masturbation rests, is the story of male extra-coital ejaculation, and thus does not (or theoretically should not) apply to women (Laqueur, 2003).

Even considering these long-standing religious objections to masturbation, however, the widespread disparagement of the behavior in Western societies did not begin to accelerate until the early eighteenth century (Laqueur, 2003). Importantly, during this time, the main propagators of the idea that masturbation was dangerous shifted from religious institutions to medical ones (Stengers & Van Neck, 2001). This may have been due to the emerging state interest at that time
in studying and managing populations, and particularly, in the science of sex as a means toward
population control; practitioners of science and medicine sought to know and thereby restrict
sexual practices for what they perceived to be the social good (Foucault, 1978). Masturbation
was caught in the crosshairs of this effort. Though the Church did condemn masturbation as a
sin, it was not the biblical story of Onan that terrified society – it was the sudden outpouring of
medical mandates to refrain from masturbation so as to avoid debilitating and fatal ailments that
spread the ideas so widely (Laqueur, 2003; Stengers & Van Neck, 2001).

In the early eighteenth century, publications written by those claiming medical expertise
began to pronounce the various bodily harms one could expect to endure as a result of
masturbating. Onanism, as masturbation was then called, began to be seen not only as sinful but
physically dangerous (Laqueur, 2003; Stengers & Van Neck, 2001). In 1715, a small pamphlet,
entitled Onania, was first published anonymously in London. In this and many subsequent
editions (the fifteenth edition was published in 1730), the author laments the “abominable
practice” particularly among the “youth of this nation,” and details a vast array of moral and
physical consequences for those who participate (Laqueur, 2003; Stengers & Van Neck, 2001).
Each subsequent edition of Onania expanded on the previous one, and each incorporated more
titillating, terrifying and potentially fabricated letters from concerned readers, to which the
author responded with solemn advice (Laqueur, 2003; Stengers & Van Neck, 2001). Many of the
letters presented in the latter editions of Onania were from girls and women, and the prevailing
medical opinion of the time was that masturbation was as common among girls and women as it
was among boys and men, and that it was equally (if not more) dangerous for women and girls
(Laqueur, 2003). As Thomas Laqueur (2003) argues, the danger that masturbation ostensibly
posed for women could not be due to semen loss, and so instead was due to the fear that women’s sexual pleasure could become uncontrollable (more on this below):

The danger of masturbation [among women] was not dearth – not running out of something – but excess. Onanism stands at the center of a sexual economy threatening to whirl out of control from its sheer energy, an economy in which the restraints of the ordinary world, the restraints of nature, did not seem to operate (p. 204).

*Onania* was followed, in 1760, by Samuel-August Tissot’s *L’Onanisme*. Tissot was a Swiss physician who, by the end of his career, was famous throughout Europe. The influence of his treatise on the dangers of masturbation was also considerable, and physicians, philosophers, pedagogues, and prosecutors trumpeted for decades the belief that masturbation was the cause of innumerable ailments (and even death), alongside being highly immoral (Stengers & Van Neck, 2001). Men were advised to avoid masturbation at all costs, even if it meant satisfying sexual urges through the hiring of sex workers (Laqueur, 2003; Stengers & Van Neck, 2001).

Preventing masturbation among children, both boys and girls, was also a primary concern. For instance, German pedagogy expert Christian Salzmann wrote an entire volume in 1785 about the “secret sins of youth,” though the only sin addressed was masturbation (Stengers & Van Neck, 2001). In that book, he warned his students that reading certain books – even classic scholastic and religious literature such as Ovid, the Bible, and dictionaries – could be dangerous because of the sometimes detailed descriptions of sexual behaviors, which could stimulate one’s imagination. Salzmann, like the author of *Onania*, claimed that “even more girls” than boys had succumbed to solitary sex (as quoted in Laqueur, 2003, p. 202), and Tissot agreed, saying, “the disorder seems even to make greater progress with women than with men” (as quoted in Laqueur, 2003, p. 201).
Though some of Tissot’s contemporaries – both physicians and scholars – disagreed with his dire predictions of illness, they admitted that they would never dare to express their dissenting views publically. For example, a Dr. Bourdeu, writing in 1769, discussed with colleagues that masturbation “is a need, and even when it is not done from need, it is still a pleasant thing,” but he also confessed, “to divulge these principles would be to trample on decency, to arouse the most odious suspicions concerning myself, and to commit an outrage against society” (as quoted in Stengers & Van Neck, 2001, p. 81). Thus, by the latter part of the eighteenth century, Tissot’s message about the dangers of masturbation had become so dominant, that to speak in favor of the behavior was to “commit an outrage against society.”

But the question remains as to why medical experts, philosophers, and educators (not to mention religious leaders) thought it apt to construct masturbation as so very dangerous. What social and/or political purpose was served by composing and peddling these terrifying theses? While there may have been many reasons for this sudden interest in masturbation as a dangerous and reprehensible practice for men, women, boys and girls, Laqueur (2003) suggests that one of the main antecedents was the growing credit-based commercial economy of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. During this time, people began to be encouraged to spend their money as a means to find personal gratification and limitless abundance, but also for the good of society (Laqueur, 2003). Credit offered people a means to satisfy their desires immediately, and worry about the rest later. This sort of unrestricted indulgence with regards to spending produced a cultural anxiety that directly paralleled that of solitary masturbation: “The problem in both realms was self-generated desire that had no natural bounds. It was born not from some adamantine, foundational need or from original sin but from the imagination and fiction” (Laqueur, 2003, p. 279). Laqueur argues that it is the amorphous and uncontainable feature of the
imagination that seemed so very morally dangerous in both the economic and personal spheres. Just as the implementation of credit created a context of financial flexibility and unconstrained luxury, so too did masturbation defy any sort of external regulation and tend toward excess. Masturbation, as a solitary sexual behavior, was not only non-reproductive, but it could be engaged in frequently and secretly, and was therefore impossible to regulate and utterly excessive.

Thus, the encouragement from the medical establishment to refrain from masturbation was part of a larger social project to resist what were seen as unstable excesses, both economically and sexually. “It is not an accident,” Laqueur (2003) writes, “that Onania was published in the same decade as … the first stock-market crashes” (p. 249). The new social trend toward excess in the late eighteenth century posed new economic dangers, and sexuality was presumed to be equally dangerous:

The crusade against masturbation targets, in fact, sexuality as a whole: it is supported by a theory of ‘sexual excess,’ of exaggerated expenditure which leads to weakness, exhaustion, and death. These medical concepts become meaningful when translated into economic language. A free and uncontrolled activity, governed by pleasure, is incompatible with an economy based on savings, self-control and forethought (Lejeune, 1974, p. 1015).

This “economy based on savings, self-control and forethought” precisely reflects the values of the Protestant bourgeoisie. The vast influence of the fears surrounding masturbation may thus have much to do with the power of the bourgeoisie to define itself in terms of what it was not (sexually/economically out of control), and to cement its ability to maintain superior moral codes, thereby justifying its superior health and status: “The repression of deviant sexuality (thus
particularly of masturbation) … has a very precise goal: to legitimize the bourgeoisie” (Aron & Kempf, 1978, p. 160, parentheses in original).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, all manner of devices and elixirs had been invented and marketed as aids in the fight against masturbation, and Tissot’s *L’Onanisme* was still being continuously published at the turn of the twentieth century (Laqueur, 2003). Women’s hysteria was commonly diagnosed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and by the late 1800s, it was thought to be a disease of sexual frustration (Maines, 1999). Medical practitioners provided women with therapies to treat hysteria, which still amounted to the stimulation of women’s genitals, in a strictly professional (not personal/sexual) capacity. Practitioners used douches and water therapies, as well as manual stimulation of women’s genitals to treat their patients, and by the late nineteenth century, the electronic vibrator had been invented (Maines, 1999). Notably, men were never considered hysterical or genitally stimulated in doctor’s offices (they lack wombs). Though their masturbation was thought to be just as dangerous as women’s, and devices were marketed to both women and men to attempt to restrict solitary masturbation, it was women’s bodies that were the site of this questionable medical intervention of professional genital massage. It was women in particular who were seen as potential threats to the social order.

Though the vibrator was a popular medical tool during the Victorian era, physicians nevertheless did not think it was appropriate for women to use vibrators (or any other means) to masturbate themselves. Women who masturbated were presumed to be unsatisfied with their marital sexual intercourse, and in the case of unmarried woman, masturbation was presumed to lead to “marital aversion” (Maines, 1999). Married women who masturbated, however, were considered the most treacherous, since these women threw into question the long-held belief that
sexual intercourse was mutually satisfying (Laqueur, 2003; Maines, 1999). Their masturbation demonstrated their desire for sexual pleasure, and also revealed the extent to which they could provide themselves with this pleasure, without the help of men. Perhaps this is why, at the same time that physicians noted the efficacy of pelvic massage and vibrator use to “cure” women’s hysteria, they condemned solitary masturbation as a form of violence against oneself. Women’s masturbation and autonomous seeking of sexual pleasure had begun to threaten existing systems of social power (in this case, heterosexuality).

Though Victorian women are often stereotyped as prudish, a survey conducted in 1892 by Clelia Mosher (1892/1980), a medical doctor, demonstrated that many women of that time reported feeling sexual desire, had experienced orgasms, and believed that sex was pleasurable for both men and women. Physicians and scholars at the time had likewise decided that sexual pleasure in itself was not a moral or physical risk. But unlike the pleasure one could experience during sexual intercourse, masturbation was viewed as a sort of cheap copy of the real thing, and thus remained a condemnable behavior throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Laqueur, 2003).

During this period of time, the perceived dangers of masturbation shifted from being primarily organic (such as physical degeneracy) to being primarily psychological (such as guilt and narcissism) (Laqueur, 2003). This new view emerged in part because the late nineteenth century brought about the germ theory of disease, thereby debunking the idea that diseases such as tuberculosis were caused by masturbation (Laqueur, 2003). With this new understanding of physical pathology,

The ills of masturbation were harder to incorporate in a medical model and stood ever more exposed for what they had always been: symptoms of the moral seriousness of the
offense, of the profound deviance that masturbation represented in the order of things (Laqueur, 2003, p. 370).

While doctors relied less and less on the idea that masturbation would lead to disease, they still frequently argued that masturbation was dangerous to the psyche and, by extension, to society. Many scholars of the time, including Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, acknowledged that masturbation was common among animals and non-human primates, and could even be considered healthy among children (Laqueur, 2003). The question then arose as to what should be considered “normal” after childhood. Ellis argued that women’s masturbation after puberty was psychologically dangerous because it would lead to “an aversion for normal coition in later life” (as quoted in Laqueur, 2003, p. 377). Freud (1925/1962) believed that women’s masturbation was a stunted version of mature sexuality; whereas sexually mature women would have abandoned their childhood clitoral masturbation in favor of mature vaginal intercourse, women who continued to masturbate had failed to mature.

The prevailing view at the time, then, was that for men and women, post-pubertal masturbation would lead to pathological self-consciousness; it would lead to an over-reliance on (and perhaps even an addiction to) self-stimulation that would produce anxious frustration and less-than-satisfying partnered sex. Since masturbation was considered a counterfeit pleasure, it could never provide the sort of satisfaction that coitus could. Masturbation was and is so easy to engage in, and so it was feared that hapless young people would unknowingly seek it out excessively and then fall into a nervous state when the pleasures they received fell short (Laqueur, 2003). The frustration brought about by this situation and the guilt brought about by the (often unsuccessful) attempts to refrain from masturbating were thought to lead to all number of psychological repercussions: “Guilt and its consequences – neurosis, tiredness, anxiety,
hysteria, physical discomforts of all sorts, failure to achieve what life promised, moral collapse, abjection – replaced death and imbecility as the primary wages of solitary sex” (Laqueur, 2003, p. 372). So by the early and middle part of the twentieth century, the moral regulation of masturbation had moved from religion to medicine to psychology, and, to a great degree, had also become the responsibility of individuals. Foucault (1977, 1978) might have argued that individuals came to internalize the mandates of society regarding masturbation, participated in self-surveillance, and attempted to discipline their behaviors. When they encountered (nearly inevitable) failure, their shame and silence fanned the flames of their self-discipline, and therefore reinforced the dominant ideologies of the time.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, researchers began to document human sexuality as people actually lived it, and women’s sexuality became a key component in this exploration. Kinsey (1953) found that nearly half of the women in his study reported masturbating in their lifetimes, and that most of these women employed clitoral stimulation as opposed to vaginal stimulation during masturbation. More than a decade later, Masters and Johnson (1966) corroborated these findings, reporting that women were more likely to experience an orgasm during masturbation than during partnered sex.

Feminists in the women’s liberation movement wasted no time making use of this information. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing throughout the 1970s and 1980s, feminists saw the project of liberating masturbation from its earlier constraints as an essential component of the struggle for equality and sexual freedom (Laqueur, 2003). Consciousness-raising groups leapt onto the scene during this time; groups of women met regularly to discuss their personal experiences, find commonalities between their experiences and other women’s, and examine the ways that sexist power structures could help explain their experiences (Weitz, 1982). Sexuality
was a key component of these groups, and discussing masturbation (and then practicing at home) was not uncommon (Barbach, 1974; Dodson, 1996). Women who participated in consciousness-raising groups reported feeling less isolated and depressed, more self-assured, and better able to recognize the social and structural causes of their problems (Weitz, 1982). One woman described this experience as follows: “I think that sometimes it is really important that in this group I learn that I am not alone, that I’m not crazy, because other people feel the same way that I do” (Weitz, 1982, p. 235).

Many feminists at the time began to support the notion that a woman’s sexuality – and in particular, her masturbation – is a key component of her political liberation. For instance, in 1974, Betty Dodson, using art and activism, encouraged women to view masturbation as the most important form their sexuality can take: “Masturbation is our primary sexual life. It is our sexual base. Everything we do beyond that is simply how we choose to socialize our sex life” (quoted in Laqueur, 2003, p. 401). In this statement she reverses the traditional logic that heterosexual intercourse is the ultimate expression of human sexuality, and instead gives women permission to enjoy their sexuality on their own terms. She suggests, alongside others at the time such as Nancy Friday (1973), Lonnie Barbach (1975) and Shere Hite (1976) that sexual pleasure is a worthwhile pursuit in its own right, and a means to political gains. Not only can women enjoy sexual pleasure through masturbation, but they can also learn more about their bodies for the sake of improving their partnered sexual encounters.

Psychological research about women’s masturbation also expanded during the 1970s and 1980s. Hite’s (1976) contested but nevertheless groundbreaking survey of American women

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7 The Hite Report (1974) was contested because it used a problematic sampling method and so it may not be generalizable, but it was also groundbreaking in that it was one of the first studies
demonstrated that though many women physically enjoyed masturbating, many also struggled with feelings of guilt and believed the purpose of masturbation to be primarily a substitute for partnered sex. Thus, though feminist ideals of the liberatory potential of masturbation had begun to change how masturbation was viewed, the longstanding moral fears of masturbation persisted (and may still persist today). Much of the psychological research of this time focused on unhappy correlates of masturbation, such as shame or guilt (Arafat & Cotton, 1974; Greenberg & Archambault, 1973; Kelley, 1985; Mosher & Vonderheide, 1985; Wyatt, Peters, & Guthrie, 1988), depression (Arafat & Cotton, 1974), unattractiveness (Durham & Grossnickle, 1982), and frequency of partnered sexual behaviors (Herold & Way, 1983). One study found that less than a third of parents of daughters wanted their daughters to have a positive view toward masturbation in adolescence (Gagnon, 1985).

During the late 1980s and 1990s, due to the intensive research focus at the time on ways to combat the spread of HIV and AIDS, researchers began to investigate women’s masturbation through a public health lens, exploring correlations, for example, between women’s attitudes toward masturbation and contraceptive use (Davidson & Moore, 1994; Mosher & Vonderheide, 1985; Robinson, Bockting, & Harrell, 2002). The 1990s also ushered in a more contextually nuanced exploration of women’s masturbation, beginning with a nationally representative study conducted by Edward Laumann and colleagues in 1994. Other researchers expanded this research further by exploring how women learn about masturbation (Smith et al., 1996) and the role of masturbation in marital and sexual satisfaction (Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991).

(Mosher [1892/1980] notwithstanding) that utilized women’s narratives as a means to better understand women’s subjective sexual experiences.
Despite the increasingly complex focus on women’s masturbation in the scientific literature, one historical event in the 1990s served as a stark reminder of the continued stigma associated with masturbation (mentioned briefly above). In December of 1994, Joycelyn Elders, the Surgeon General of the United States, gave a speech at the World AIDS Day Conference at the United Nations. After her speech, Elders fielded a question from Dr. Rob Clark, a psychologist, about whether “a more explicit discussion and promotion of masturbation” among children in schools could be a means to curtail the spread of HIV (Jehl, 1994). Elders responded that she was a “very strong advocate” of sex education in schools, and that masturbation in particular could be a part of that:

Masturbation is a part of human sexuality, and it’s a part of something that perhaps should be taught. But we have not even taught our children the basics. And I feel that we have tried ignorance for a long time and it’s time we try education (Jehl, 1994).

Less than two weeks later, Elders was forced to resign, amid outrage from Republicans and Democrats alike, including President Bill Clinton (Jehl, 1994). Though her resignation reflected political discomfort with her liberal views on the decriminalization of drug use and sex education more generally, it was her views on masturbation among children that ended her tenure. Even by the end of the twentieth century, masturbation was still so culturally taboo that the idea that children could “perhaps” be told about it was too dangerous to bear.

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8 As the first Black person to ever hold the position of U.S. Surgeon General, it is also possible that cultural stereotypes that construct Black women as hypersexual and wild – the Jezebel construction of Black womanhood (Collins, 2000, 2005; Stephens & Phillips, 2003) – could have played a role in her forced resignation. Alternatively, as a middle-aged woman at the time, Elders could have been perceived as the Mammy cultural stereotype of Black womanhood, constructed as entirely asexual, and thus incapable of commenting on the sexual education of children (Collins, 2000, 2005). Could it be that Americans perceived Elders’ liberal sexual attitudes as evidence of her ostensibly pathological Black sexuality?
Research from the past two decades or so has begun to examine more positive aspects of women’s masturbation including relationships between masturbation and body image (Shulman & Horne, 2003; Wiederman & Pryor, 1997), genital self-image (Herbenick et al., 2011), emotional intelligence (Burri, Cherkas, & Spector, 2009), sexual empowerment (Bowman, 2014), and sexual satisfaction (Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991; Phillipsohn & Hartmann, 2009). Medical studies have also linked women’s orgasmic masturbation to increased oxytocin levels, which may help explain the satisfaction and calmness women feel after masturbating (Graziottin, 2000). Recent studies show that more and more women report masturbating (e.g., Herbenick et al., 2010), which may reflect an actual trend, but may also reflect a greater willingness among women to admit to participating in a historically maligned behavior (more on the current state of the research literature below). However, the stigma surrounding masturbation, particularly for girls and women, remains (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Tiefer, 1998). Perhaps the current moment of polarizing politics and tenuous economic security (the Great Recession of 2008 looms fresh in the minds and lives of many) has created a context in the United States today that is not so different from that of the eighteenth century. Sexual excess, particularly among young people and women, is still a fear that structures the dominant views of society (e.g., McClelland & Fine, 2008a). It remains to be seen whether women’s masturbation can continue to develop into the site of erotic power feminists have long dreamed it could be (Lorde, 1984).

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9 For instance, Watson & McKee (2013) found that girls between 14 and 16 years old viewed women’s masturbation as a “sad” substitute for partnered sex, and therefore thought of it as “desperate.” The girls in their study also reported thinking of masturbation as “lesbian-y” because a woman is touching female genitalia (more on this below; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013).
Current social contexts and constructions of women’s solitary masturbation. As can be seen throughout history, women’s sexual pleasure and desire are not traditionally understood as necessary components of their sexuality, since the purpose of (hetero)sexuality has historically been either reproduction or male sexual pleasure (Rich, 1980; Vance, 1989). Indeed, Sara McClelland & Michelle Fine (2008a) build on the historical notions of sexual excess outlined above to argue that women’s sexual pleasure is socially constructed as excessive – that is, it is superfluous to the traditional goals of sexuality: “Excess is actually a word that draws attention to the line between what is required and what is not required, but is there anyway. Female sexuality, and specifically female sexual pleasure, exists at this very line” (p. 86). Women’s solitary masturbation adds complexity to this framework, because, as I have argued elsewhere: “nothing about masturbation is ever ‘required’ from the start. On the other hand, perhaps it is this very quality of masturbation that makes it all the more excessive” (Bowman, 2014, p. 364). When a woman masturbates, she experiences pleasure that is not tied to the traditional “requirements” of her sexuality. She need not concern herself with producing offspring or preventing pregnancy; with no partner present, no one’s pleasure matters but her own. Women’s masturbation and the pleasure it provides are perhaps the very height of excess; the independent and unregulated nature of the action could be the very crux of its apparent threat to the social order.

One social site in which the regulation of women’s sexuality occurs is religion. Christianity, for instance, regulates both men’s and women’s sexual desires through the concept of lust. Lust is a concept that, while related to sexual desire and often considered a synonym thereof (Levine, 2003), holds special meaning in Christianity. Generally speaking, whereas sexual desire, arousal, and pleasure are considered biologically natural and not sinful in and of
themselves, Christians are expected to confine these experiences to their marital relationships and remove related thoughts from their minds; any stepping outside of this norm is considered lustful and sinful (Vander Spek, 2011). Jesus taught that “adultery in the heart” is a sin (Matthew 5:28 New International Version), and Jim Vander Spek, a Christian writer, defines lust as “a willfully allowed pleasurable gratification of wrongfully directed sexual desire” (2011, p. 30). Masturbatory pleasure and “lust” seem to be intimately intertwined with one another. Lust is sinful because it is an extramarital form of “pleasurable gratification,” and the definition of lust is so broad as to encompass not just interpersonal behaviors but also solitary behaviors and thoughts (“adultery in the heart”). In such a restrictive context, exceeding Christianity’s expectations of sexual morality appears almost inevitable, and indeed, Christians are advised that to overcome the excess of lust, they should “recoil” from any possible stimulator thereof (Vander Spek, 2011).

But religion is not the only regulatory institution that informs women’s sexuality. The hegemonic fear of women’s uncontained sexuality has historically intersected with multiple social identities and locations, disproportionately affecting underprivileged groups (Lorde, 1984; McClelland & Fine, 2008a; Zavella, 2003). For instance, cultural expectations and racial stereotypes play a prominent role in the construction of women’s sexuality and sexual pleasure. In Latino/a communities, a context of Catholicism often reflects the Christian ideals above, and encourages girls to remain “pure” and virginal until marriage (Espín, 1984; Zavella, 2003). Purity is often understood not just as a reflection of one’s individual honor, but also of one’s family’s honor, making this mandate all the more laden with meaning for women and girls (Garcia, 2012). Sexual pleasure is also inextricably linked to this notion, as Latina girls who have had sex may be constructed in their communities as irrevocably promiscuous (Zavella, 2003).
Like Black women, Latina women are stereotyped in the United States as provocative, hypersexual and particularly “at-risk” for negative sexual outcomes, and tend to be overly defined by their body parts, including characterizations of their breasts, hips, and buttocks as curvaceous and exotic (Collins, 2000, 2005; Garcia, 2012; Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004). Black women have been historically constructed as falling into one of several sexual stereotypes, including the *Jezebel* (an exotic, promiscuous, insatiable woman who uses her sexuality for attention and power), and the *Mammy* (opposite of the *Jezebel*, she is a non-threatening, unattractive, asexual, nurturing figure, who puts others’ needs before her own; Collins, 2000, 2005; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). While white women are culturally constructed as virginal and “good,” Black women in particular are constructed as incapable of being sexually innocent (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Asian women, too, are sometimes stereotyped as hypersexual (Shimizu, 2007), and constructions of Asian women as overly exotic, feminine, submissive, and available to white men are exceedingly common (Lee, 1996; Pyke & Johnson, 2003; Shimizu, 2007). The notion that Asian people are a “model minority” (Chou & Feagin, 2016) complicates these sexual stereotypes, constructing Asian women as sexually eager to please and achieve (Shimizu, 2007).

Historical understandings of women’s sexuality are also informed by the inequities of social class, ability, and sexual orientation. Working class girls of the early twentieth century, for instance, were often arrested for prostitution or other “immoral acts,” while their wealthier and sometimes more educated sisters enjoyed security in their dance hall patronage and premarital dalliances (Alexander, 1995). Women with intellectual and developmental disabilities, “promiscuous” women, working class women, women of color, and lesbians were thought to be unfit to bear and raise children, and so were institutionalized or sterilized against their will.
during this time (Brantlinger, 1995; Largent, 2011; Scott et al., 2017; Wako & Page, 2008). The traces of these practices can still be seen today. Poor women and women of color are disproportionately prescribed dangerous and long-lasting birth control medications such as Depo-Provera, without being informed of the potential side effects, suggesting that the age of eugenics and population control is not an entirely distant memory (Wako & Page, 2008). Queer girls of color are disproportionately disciplined in schools (Chmielewski, Belmonte, Fine, & Stoudt, 2016), and queer women continue to work for the right to legally adopt children (Beitsch, 2015). The common thread running through these examples is a fear and stigmatization of excessive sexuality, particularly among historically marginalized groups of girls and women.

In some ways, the stigma associated with women’s masturbation appears to be gradually eroding. While traditional forms of sex education for girls, such as schools and parents, may still overlook masturbation, access to information for adult women may be increasing. Sex toy parties on college campuses are on the rise (Herbenick et al., 2009; Jozkowski et al., 2012), information about sexual pleasure and masturbation are available online via such diverse entities as Planned Parenthood, Women’s Health Magazine, and MTV (MTV Girl Code, 2013; Planned Parenthood, 2014; Thapoung, 2014), and the market for sex toys – now sold in such unexpected and accessible venues as CVS and Wal-Mart – is booming (Morris, 2013). Women have more opportunities than ever before to educate themselves about masturbation and sexual pleasure. However, even as the historical stigma appears to wane, another powerful discourse may underlie this shift – the notion that individual women should be responsible for, and work to improve, their own sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

Popular discussions of women’s sexuality and sexual pleasure are now often accompanied by discourses of hard work, management, and achievement (Cacchioni, 2007;
Jackson and Scott (1997) discuss orgasm as a “finished product” that is expected to be “manufactured through a linear progression of a series of simplified actions” (as cited in Frith, 2013, p. 500). During partnered (hetero)sex, women are expected to consistently “achieve” orgasm (or at least perform orgasm) as a method of demonstrating their (male) partner’s virility (Barbach, 1975; Cacchioni, 2007; Frith, 2013; Jackson and Scott, 2007; Opperman et al., 2014; Wiederman, 1997). Masturbation is thus often presented as a means through which women can become ever more proficient in orgasm production, primarily to improve their partnered sexual experiences. This “sex-manual approach” to sexual learning again reduces women’s sexuality to a goal-oriented formula (Grosz, 1995/2002). These discourses of achievement are reflective of pressures toward individualism and personal success (Burns, Futch & Tolman, 2011; Fine & McClelland, 2006). Beyond masturbation being fun and pleasurable, the message seems to be that one must also work to be proficient in masturbation, and to gain knowledge from it for the purposes of improving partnered sexual experiences.

10 To see how this discourse is presented in popular culture to women, I did a quick online search of popular women’s magazines for mention of women’s masturbation. (My search was relatively non-systematic, but did use the following parameters: I triangulated several lists of the most popular women’s magazines including Amazon.com’s list of best sellers to identify magazines. I used Google to search “[Magazine Name] magazine masturbation.” I clicked on any links that the search returned that were links to the official magazine website and also appeared to reference women’s masturbation. Not all magazines made reference to women’s masturbation in this search (e.g., Yoga Journal). Magazines I found that reference the topic included: Vogue, Women’s Health Magazine, Cosmopolitan, Shape, Elle, Seventeen, “O” Oprah, Women’s Day, Redbook, Teen Vogue, Bust and Glamour.) In analyzing these magazines, I found that many focus on, or at least reference, how masturbation is a means to improving one’s partnered sex life. Vogue claims that “sex toys are the new couples therapy” (Sciotino, 2014), Shape declares that masturbation is the “surefire secret to better sex” (Kelly, 2014), and Oprah’s O magazine lists masturbation within its “better sex homework” tips (Pikul, 2012). These articles present masturbation as yet another form of self-improvement and work that women are now being expected to undertake in order to be “better” at partnered sex (Cacchioni, 2007; Frith, 2013).
Because women’s sexuality is so often presented as something that should be worked on and improved, masturbation itself begins to appear to be something that can be done “properly” (and by extension, something that could potentially be done “improperly”). Nicola Gavey (1992) calls this the “tyranny of inferred normality” (p. 331). That is, she argues that in many cases, women presume some notion of what is “normal” (often based around heterosexual behavior), and this presumption motivates women to conform their sexual behaviors and attitudes to such inferred norms (see also Fahs & Frank, 2014). In the case of women’s masturbation, discourses of achievement and normality may compel women to practice masturbating so as to get “better” at it and to do it “correctly.” The social mandates to masturbate in the “right” way and to manage one’s masturbation in service to relational goals may be roadblocks to women’s creativity and experimentation, limiting their capacity to playfully and willfully explore their “bodies and pleasures” as a means toward self-determination and resistance to oppressive norms (more on this below; Foucault, 1978, p. 157).

Nevertheless, American culture seems to be making progress in discussions of women’s masturbation. Pleasure for pleasure’s sake as well as understanding one’s own body for knowledge’s sake are increasingly represented. Teen Vogue has a “Vag-atomy 101” page on their website, which includes detailed diagrams and descriptions of women’s sexual anatomy including one diagram that accurately represents the internal structures of the clitoris.

11 For instance, Cosmopolitan tells its readers, “you’re not supposed to use your fingers as a mini penis ramming into your vagina” (Moore, 2015), and Woman’s Day cautions women that they may not be “masturbating often enough,” which they say is “at least three times a week” (Page, 2015). Redbook even goes so far as to lure readers in with the panicked title, “My Husband Caught Me Masturbating, And It Led to Our Divorce” (Harris, 2015).

12 Pornography may also represent women’s masturbation in particular ways, such that women could feel compelled to replicate the type of masturbation they see presented in pornography, but no research has yet empirically examined this possibility (Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, & Irizarry, 2010; Wright, Bae, & Funk, 2013).
(Wischhover, 2015). Similarly, a *Glamour* article encourages women to keep masturbating “even when you’re in a relationship” by suggesting that women should “own” their sexuality:

> As Hutcherson [an OBGYN] says, men continue to masturbate while in relationships, and no one ever bats an eye at that … which further perpetuates the stereotype that women aren’t as sexual as men – something that isn’t true. When you own your sexuality, you’re thumbing your nose at a society that has yet to truly embrace the very real fact that women are sexual beings who desire sex just as much as men (Chatel, 2016).

Presenting this type of information to girls and women in such a matter-of-fact and empowering way is very new; when I first searched for women’s magazines discussing masturbation for the proposal for this dissertation, I found far fewer magazines that discussed masturbation at all, and no instances of such positive and unabashed knowledge dissemination. Teaching girls and women about their bodies and the patriarchal social context of their sexualities challenges existing epistemologies of ignorance, because women are encouraged to know the information that has traditionally been kept from them, and to use this information for their own pleasures and wellbeing, rather than that of their (male) partners (Tuana, 2004).

**Women’s sexual bodies as socially inscribed.** Considering the extent to which current social norms and discourses surrounding masturbation have been informed by historical ones, I turn now to the ways in which these social norms and discourses are theorized to intersect with women’s embodied experiences. For Foucault (1978) and feminist social constructionists (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Braidotti, 1994; Bordo, 1993; Collins, 2005; Young, 1990), bodies are continually regulated and molded by the social world, and so the ways that people move their bodies in space and the ways that people experience their bodies through their sensory perceptions are always already intertwined with social norms and expectations. In the day-to-day process of living in a
society that continually demands people to conform their bodies and minds to dominant norms, people internalize these norms and *embody* them. Just as people’s psyches cannot escape the regulation of discourse, neither can people’s bodies. This type of embodiment is known as *socially inscribed embodiment*, because the body is conceptualized as a surface onto which social norms and discourses can be etched. For example, Western standards of feminine beauty dictate all manner of ways that women are expected to manage and discipline their bodies so as to achieve nearly impossible ideals. As Andrea Dworkin (1974) argues:

> Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her motility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.* And of course, the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one (p. 113; Dworkin’s emphasis).

By living every day in an environment that requires them to conform to social norms, women unconsciously internalize these dominant requirements, and then “perform” their bodies in ways that are considered socially acceptable (Butler, 1990; Collins, 2005). Once women internalize social norms, their behaviors and performances of social expectations are a process – a practice – that is repeated over and over to the point at which it becomes habit, appears natural (even to women themselves), and is accomplished by women often without even having to think about it (Braidotti, 1994; Butler, 1990; Bordieu, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Young, 1990).  

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13 Iris Marion Young (1990), similar to Dworkin (1974), uses the example of “throwing like a girl” to demonstrate the degree to which girls and women are encouraged to restrict their bodily movements, to not take up too much space, and to constantly imagine themselves as objects of an external (male) gaze. She argues that girls do not “naturally” throw a ball in any particular way, but because of the daily process of living in the world as a girl, they begin to embody the norms
conceptualization of gender also allows for interruptions and resistances because once such practices are observed and named, they can also be interrogated and changed.

Women’s embodied sexuality is similarly regulated by inscribed social norms. For instance, in a social context that defines women’s bodies as unacceptable unless worked upon (Dworkin, 1974; Bartky, 1990), women internalize this notion and may dislike their natural bodies. Women of color’s sexual bodies have been, and continue to be, particularly socially regulated. While Black women’s bodies, for instance, are held to similar standards of beauty as white women’s, these standards (including pale skin and limp, straight hair) are all the more impossible to attain for Black women, creating situations in which Black women may feel unhappy with, and/or try to modify, their bodies (Collins, 2005; Hall, 1995; Watson et al., 2012). At the same time, Black women’s bodies are hypersexualized and particular body parts are overly eroticized and objectified (Collins, 2005; Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004), leading to what W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) would call a double-consciousness in which Black women may view their bodies through the lens of the dominant white notions of what Black sexual bodies should be (Collins, 2000, 2005).

Women’s genitals – and in particular, women of color’s genitals – are often constructed as dirty, gross and shameful (Fahs, 2014c; Hite, 1976; Reinholtz & Muehlenhard, 1995; Rubin, 1984), and women can internalize this view to the point at which they may feel disgust toward their own genitals. Psychologists have developed the construct of female genital self-image, or the degree to which women feel positively toward their genitals, as a means of measuring such an embodied norm (Herbenick & Reece, 2010). Women with higher genital self-image are more of their culture, and their very physical movements (as well as their psychology) are thereby regulated.
likely to masturbate and use vibrators, and have better overall sexual health and functioning (Herbenick & Reece, 2010; Herbenick et al., 2011). Perhaps insisting on loving one’s body, even in the face of sexist and racist norms, represents an example of willful subjectivity (Ahmed, 2014) and resistance to social regulation.

**Extra-discursive experiences.** Though many social discourses work to regulate women’s sexuality and solitary masturbation, perhaps women can nevertheless resist and/or find freedom from the mandates of these discourses. Though Foucault (1977, 1978) claims that no one can escape the regulatory grip of discourse, Maureen Cain (1993), takes up Foucault’s understanding of discourse and proposes a possible way out. In theorizing what she calls the extra-discursive (or pre-discursive – a term she uses interchangeably with extra-discursive; see also Dowsett, 1996), she demonstrates the resistant and liberatory potential of experiences that can be considered to occur outside of discourse.

In her essay questioning the usefulness of Foucault for feminist epistemology, Cain (1993) asks the following question: “Is it possible to have an experience without a knowledge (let alone a developed discourse) to have it in?” (p. 85; Cain’s emphasis). As detailed above, Foucault (1972) conceives of discourses as the rules and mechanisms by which relationships between subjects, objects, and sites of regulation are maintained. Cain, drawing on this definition, puts forth examples of relations that she argues existed in “reality” before they were “discovered” or named as such; phenomena that, in the particular historical moment she references, had not yet been discoursed, as it were (or at least had only been discoursed in a certain way; see also Frost, McClelland, Clark, & Boylan, 2014, who discuss this idea in terms of experiences that have not yet been “languaged”).
For example, Cain describes Liz Kelly’s (1988) research on sexual violence. Women in Kelly’s sample often reported experiences of what she called “pressurized sex” with men – sex that ranged from coerced sex to rape. Her participants rarely named or thought of their experiences as “sexual violence,” but once this conceptualization was presented to them, most recognized it and applied it to their experiences. Cain (1993) argues that Kelly’s work demonstrates an extra-discursive possibility: “many of the relationships which bind us down are not yet available to politics because they are not yet available to anyone’s knowledge” (p. 84). She explains that sexual violence is a phenomenon that existed prior to being named or discoursed (it “pre-exist[ed] its possible utterance” [p. 83]). Though these incidents were commonly experienced, even the women themselves – and society at large – did not yet think of them as “violence.” This example demonstrates the degree to which dominant discourses can moderate the unconscious psychology of individuals in ways that oppose their emancipatory interests. Naming these experiences “sexual violence” provides a counter-discursive (and potentially liberatory) space with which to identify. While the dominant discourses of the time may have considered these encounters a normative practice of heterosexuality (and they may still), by naming them “sexual violence,” women could access a different discourse. This counter-discourse may not have been as widely accepted or dominant, but it nonetheless could act as a mechanism of resistance to the oppression the women faced (more on this below).

While the emergence or creation of a counter-discourse is a politically important moment (more below), Cain maintains that prior to the articulation of a new discourse, the women in
Kelly’s study lived their experiences extra-discursively. She thus claims that discourse can be limited in its ability to fully capture human experiences and relationships:14

The argument that not all relationships in which people live are expressible in discourse is a difficult one philosophically and, I believe, a necessary one politically for feminists and subjugated people generally. It is necessary to establish the possibility of an unthought relationship in order to make sense of feminist work which appears to expose, for the first time, the relationships in which women are placed, while yet claiming to know that the relationship preceded the exposure which ‘brought it to light’ (p. 74).

Cain argues that not all experiences and relationships are “expressible in discourse.” She calls such relationships “unthought relationships” to convey the notion that without an accepted discursive structure to organize a relationship, that relationship remains outside of cultural understanding – it cannot be conceived of in the dominant cultural imaginary. This does not mean that the experience does not exist or cannot be thought on an individual level. Cain is arguing that the dominant discourses that pervade society can act as psychological roadblocks to an individual’s ability to think about her experiences in ways that deviate from dominant discourses.

Cain’s example of sexual violence as an extra-discursive possibility (as well as other examples she posits, such as sexual harassment) details oppressive and interpersonal relations. Though these relations are oppressive on both macro and micro levels (e.g., patriarchal structures of oppression as well as intra-individual technologies of the self), in the cases both of sexual

14 My use of the word “relationship” or “relation” here (and Cain’s use in the following quote) is meant to utilize Foucault’s notion of discourse as a set of rules that govern relationships between, for example, subjects and objects. Throughout my discussion of Cain’s analysis of Foucault, I use the word in this way, and not necessarily to indicate interpersonal or sexual relationships.
violence and sexual harassment, she investigates interpersonal situations. I wonder whether the extra-discursive can be even broader than this. Could a phenomenon be extra-discursive but not oppressive? Could the extra-discursive refer not just to an association one has with another person but also an association one has with oneself? And if this is possible, what political purpose is served (and whose political interest is served) by relegating a non-oppressive and/or solitary situation to the extra-discursive? That is, in the case of Kelly’s (1988) research, oppressive norms of sexism and heterosexuality were bolstered by refusing to label a violent situation violent. Men’s behavior toward women was oppressive, but by keeping the experience-as-oppressive out of discourse, this oppression also remained obscured. Therefore, in an oppressive situation like sexual violence, the extra-discursive exists because to name the experience and create a counter-discourse is to threaten established systems of power. Fine’s (1988) influential work on the “missing discourse of desire” reiterates this notion as well: bringing language to women’s and girls’ experiences is often understood as crucial to the feminist goals of making visible and validating their experiences. But what about an experience like solitary masturbation, which dominant discourses may stigmatize, but which women nevertheless often enjoy? Could the extra-discursive apply to an experience that is positive, wanted and even potentially empowering (or at least not oppressive)? If so, what and whose political purpose is served?

**Women’s solitary masturbation as extra-discursive.** In my investigation into women’s experiences of solitary masturbation, I draw on Cain’s (1993) theory of the extra-discursive and apply the theory to a context that is not necessarily oppressive and that is physically solitary. Women’s solitary masturbation experiences can be considered extra-discursive in (at least) two ways.
First, women who masturbate as young children before they have language to describe their behavior or are aware of the social meanings of women’s masturbation could be masturbating extra-discursively. Girls are known to masturbate (as are boys) as very young children (see e.g., Mallants & Casteels, 2008). However, parents and schools rarely discuss masturbation with young children (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013). In a context of such limited discursive knowledge (i.e., a context in which a child lacks the language to describe their behavior as “masturbation” or understand the social meanings of girls’/women’s masturbation), girls may experience their masturbation in an (however brief) extra-discursive space. This type of extra-discursive experience expands on Cain’s (1993) analysis of the extra-discursive in that this example is neither interpersonal (it is intra-individual) nor oppressive (since the behavior is not yet governed by discourses, it is more likely to be neutral or positive). A girl touches herself in physical solitude, and this behavior is in no way harmful to herself or anyone else. Without having yet learned the language or discourses through which to understand her experiences, perhaps a girl’s extra-discursive masturbation could be experienced primarily in her body on a sensory level (more on this below).

Women’s solitary masturbation could be considered extra-discursive in a second way. Once women learn the name of their behavior, they also learn the associated social meanings of women’s masturbation, many of which are negative. But if they enjoy the sensations they experience when they masturbate or the effects of their masturbation, they may have difficulty reconciling this internally recognized positive experience with negative dominant discourses. For instance, a woman may learn that women’s masturbation is considered a sin, that it is dangerous, or that it is otherwise “bad.” These discourses may run counter to her experience of solitary masturbation. She may note that her masturbation feels pleasurable and positive, that it does not
stand to harm her or anyone else, and that it is something she continues to desire. Faced with this tension, she may capitulate to social expectations, and try to limit or self-regulate her masturbatory actions or attitudes. But somewhere in the back of her consciousness, she may yet wonder why her embodied experience does not quite fit with these norms. She may have an inkling – a persistent and willful sensibility – that there is more to the story. This internal and not-yet-articulated sense of opposition to dominant discourses may thus exist (however temporarily) in an extra-discursive psychological space.

As a part of his theory of power/knowledge, Foucault (1980) calls knowledge that cannot or has not been articulated *subjugated knowledge*. Subjugated knowledge is a way of existing or experiencing that is not spoken for one (or both) of two reasons: because those having the experience have no language to voice it, and/or because the voices and/or language in which the knowledge is expressed are politically oppressed (Cain, 1993). Kelly’s (1988) study provides an example of how women’s extra-discursive knowledge is also subjugated. Somewhere beneath the surface of consciousness, the women in her sample knew that the experiences they were describing were somehow very wrong, but they did not have the language to articulate this notion. They may also have believed that calling their experiences “violence” would not have been taken seriously considering their politically oppressed position.

Women’s masturbation experiences provide additional examples of extra-discursive subjugated knowledges. In the case of a young child masturbating before she is aware that her behavior has a name and meanings, the extra-discursive knowledge she possesses may not be spoken. Not only is there no need to put into words the embodied experience (because it is intra-individual and involves no one else), but also the child may not have access to the words she would need to describe it. The fact that so few parents, teachers, or other adults talk to girls about
their genital anatomy or about masturbation creates an extra-discursive space that, for the child
masturbating, may not necessarily feel oppressive, but that nonetheless serves to uphold sexist
systems of power. By refusing to educate girls and women about their bodies and pleasures, a
system is maintained in which girls’ and women’s sexual knowledge is considered a dangerous
liability. Conflating sexual knowledge with sexual experience, our society deems it acceptable
for men to have sexual knowledge, but women with “too much” (“excessive” [McClelland &
Fine, 2008a]) sexual knowledge may be perceived as promiscuous (Wyatt and Riederle, 1994;
Zavella, 2003). This, in turn, creates a situation in which girls often learn about their sexual
arousal through experiences with boys rather than through experiences with themselves. As
Hyde and Jaffee (2000) note, “[girls] don’t learn to turn themselves on; rather they learn that
boys turn them on and that arousal occurs in the context of a relationship” (p. 285). So in this
case, girls’ extra-discursive masturbation experiences are not oppressive, but the discursive
context that creates this extra-discursive space, the context in which girls’ sexual knowledge is
undervalued and stigmatized, maintains oppressive systems of power through an epistemology of
ignorance (Tuana, 2004).

In the case of a woman’s nagging suspicion that her masturbation may not be so “bad”
after all (a form of knowledge that defies dominant discourses), this extra-discursive knowledge
is subjugated precisely because women’s agentic sexual pleasure is a threat to oppressive
structures of power (Weitz, 1989). As in Kelly’s (1988) research, women may not speak such
resistance to a dominant discourse because as a politically oppressed group, they may (astutely)
anticipate that their knowledge, once articulated, could be easily dismissed or derogated. So in
this example, the extra-discursive experience itself – the sense that one’s masturbation is not
actually “bad” – is again not itself oppressive. Indeed, as I explore below, this extra-discursive
experience could instead be liberatory. But keeping this extra-discursive experience subjugated reinforces dominant norms, and therefore upholds oppressive systems of power.

**Extra-discursive masturbation, willful subjects, and resistance.** But women can resist. Though people cannot escape the regulatory power of dominant discourses, Foucault (1980) argues that they can destabilize and resist them: “There are no relations of power without resistances: the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised” (p. 142). For Foucault, there cannot be power without resistance, and resistance exists precisely *because* of discursive mechanisms of power.\(^{15}\) As I have argued, dominant discourses of women’s sexuality construct women’s sexual pleasure – particularly in a solitary context – as a threat to institutions of power, thereby justifying its regulation (Rich, 1980; Vance, 1989; Weitz, 1989). But when a woman masturbates *despite* discourses that stigmatize her behavior, she appears to willfully follow her own path to pleasure and self-knowledge; perhaps this stubborn disobedience also represents resistance to the social power that would oppress her.

\(^{15}\) Some feminists have argued that Foucault does not do enough to provide subjugated groups like women the means with which to resist their oppression. For instance, Nancy Hartsock (1990) applauds Foucault’s analyses of disciplinary power and concedes that he attempts to create space for discursive resistance, but ultimately argues that his social theory “can only have destabilizing rather than transformative effects” (p. 165; see also Fraser, 1989, and McNay, 1991, and the additional discussion below). That is, Hartsock seeks a form of resistance for women that is positive and productive, and finds Foucault’s work lacking in this sense. While I sympathize with this position, I believe that Foucault’s work *does* provide some hints as to productive resistance (e.g., a focus on experimental embodiment), and in any case, I think his work can be used in conjunction with the work of feminist theorists (e.g., Ahmed, 2014; Grosz, 1994; Irigaray & Burke, 1980; Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981; Lorde, 1984) to produce a more complete and positive road to resistance. For example, feminist embodiment scholars argue that one way women can resist discursive regulation is by listening closely to their embodied sensations (more on this below). So although Foucault’s work alone may not provide adequate framing for resistance, I think that together, this web of critical theories can be mobilized as a rigorous lens through which I conduct this research.
Women’s extra-discursive solitary masturbation in its second formulation (i.e., when women feel that their masturbation may not actually be “bad”) may also provide a site of potential resistance. When a woman takes seriously her nagging suspicion that masturbation is not really “bad,” she psychologically resists the dominant discourse that would shame her. If she takes this resistance a step further by discussing her positive attitude toward masturbation with other (particularly likeminded) women, she could actually create a new discourse of resistance. By voicing her subjugated knowledge within a community of other women who may have similar knowledge, a counter-discourse is created. Perhaps women could now call masturbation “normal” or even “fun,” because the newly created counter-discourse provides a normalizing space for such attitudes that were not possible within the dominant discourse. Armed with a counter-discourse, women could think about their personal experiences in new ways, and, harkening back to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, these experiences thus could become sites for political change (e.g., Barbach, 1974; Weitz, 1982).

For feminists, whether these new labels (e.g., “fun”) for the experience capture the “true nature” of that experience is beside the point:

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16 The first formulation I posited of women’s solitary masturbation (i.e., when pre-pubescent children masturbate and do not yet know the name or meaning of their activities) cannot be understood as a site of resistance because, as I discuss in Chapter Five, it is theoretically impossible to resist a discourse to which one lacks access (Foucault, 1980). Instead, when children masturbate extra-discursively, they are free from discursive regulation, but because they are not yet embedded in discourse, they cannot resist those discourses.

17 This counter-discourse would still perform a regulatory function; all discourses work to regulate. Women discussing their masturbation in accordance with this new discourse might, for instance, feel compelled to conform their attitudes or experiences to this new normal – perhaps they want to demonstrate that they think masturbation is “fun,” even if they do not feel that way. The creation of new or counter-discourses does not remove individuals from regulatory power, but instead provides the language and cognitive space to think about a phenomenon differently (as was the case in consciousness-raising groups [Weitz, 1982]).
The question of whether pre-discursive reality is possible is not a question of whether the names are ‘right.’ … Rather, it is always a question of whether the naming is useful both as a way forward for feminist politics, and as a way of saying something which women feel or recognize as being apt in its expression of the pre-discursive experience. A recognition that a formulation is apt brings immense relief and gratitude that something unsayable can now be said and shared (Cain, 1993, p. 89).

Because discourses are normalizing (Foucault, 1977, 1978), sharing a new way of understanding a phenomenon with a community of others can bring women “immense relief and gratitude.” Suddenly, an experience that a woman may have thought she was alone in having (in this case, the experience of enjoying masturbation despite the cultural taboos) can be understood to be its own sort of normal (Weitz, 1982). This form of extra-discursive masturbation could perhaps be a site where resistance can brew. It is a willful space in which women deliberately listen to their bodies, and in so doing, deviate from dominant expectations, that solitary masturbation may represent resistance to social power.

**Lived embodiment as generative of extra-discursive resistance.** As I explained above, the term “embodiment” can refer to the ways in which people’s bodies act as sites of discursive regulation. In other words, through a process of socially inscribed embodiment, people can come to embody social norms. If bodies and psyches are constructed through social inscription, the question arises as to where resistance would come from. In Foucault’s (1977) account of self-disciplined embodiment, people’s bodies become “docile” and are compelled to conform to social norms. Though he maintains, “there are no relations of power without resistances” (Foucault, 1980, p. 142), a docile body does not seem to be one that is capable of resistance (see, e.g., Fraser, 1989). But if all bodies were simply docile embodiments of dominant discourses,
women would not masturbate at all. Since they do, additional forces must be at play. Perhaps some women’s willful subjectivity (Ahmed, 2014), their ability to think and act outside of or counter to the regulations of dominant discourse (i.e., extra-discursively), could come from somewhere other than the social world. Perhaps women are able to feel sensations in their bodies, and use this different sort of embodied subjectivity to defy the mandates of hegemonic culture.

Alongside the socially inscribed form of embodiment, the term “embodiment” can also refer to an awareness of the sensations and feelings one experiences within one’s body (Grosz, 1994). This type of experience can be conceptualized as lived embodiment, because it describes how people live and feel sensations in their own bodies (Grosz, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Young, 1990). In theorizing this form of embodiment, scholars argue that the traditional Cartesian split between mind and body should be dissolved in favor of an integration of the two. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), for instance, suggests that the body is not separate from the mind, but that the mind itself is always embodied. He puts forth the notion of a “body-subject,” by which he means that embodied perceptions do not simply await cognitive recognition or bestowal of meaning by the mind, but rather that a person’s subjectivity actually is the body – they are one and the same. He says, “I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather I am my body” (p. 150).

Though lived embodiment may seem to be incompatible with inscribed embodiment, the two can actually be usefully interwoven so as to better understand how living, perceiving body-subjects are situated in a world full of discursive regulation. While the body is a site of sensory
perception that comprises the subject-in-the-moment,\textsuperscript{18} bodily sensations are nevertheless constantly informed by the social contexts in which they take place (see, e.g., Crossley, 1996). Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) articulation of how lived embodiment informs sexual sensory perception provides a useful example:

[A stimulus] has a sexual significance for me, not when I consider, even confusedly, its possible relationship to the sexual organs or the pleasurable states, but when it exists for my body … There is an erotic ‘comprehension’ not of the order of understanding, since understanding subsumes an experience, once perceived, under some idea, while desire comprehends blindly (p. 157).

Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of erotic perception as a type of knowledge (“an erotic ‘comprehension’”) that resides in the body-subject resonates with the notion of extra-discursive experiences (Cain, 1993), while also demonstrating how body-subjects interpret their experiences discursively. Merleau-Ponty argues that erotic stimuli matter not when they are “considered,” or cognitively processed, but rather when they “exist for [the] body.” That is, the level of sensory perception is itself a form of knowledge (“comprehension”) that, in his formulation, could exist at an extra-discursive level – a level that is “not of the order of understanding.” But, he notes, once an experience is understood in terms of discourse (what he calls “some idea”), the embodied experience becomes “subsumed” by it. He holds the experience of desire as a site in which lived embodied knowledge (“comprehension”) can still exist extra-discursively.

\textsuperscript{18} By “subject-in-the-moment,” I mean that people feel sensations only on a moment-to-moment basis; sensory perception is something that happens “now” and afterward can only be remembered but not re-experienced in the same way (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).
While more recent scholars might problematize the idea that sexual desire could be extra-discursive (see, e.g., Foucault [1980] for a discussion of desire vs. pleasure, and McClelland & Fine [2008a] for a discussion of desire vs. wanting), perhaps there is some aspect of embodied eroticism that could be “blind.” Perhaps there are moments of sensation in the body that “pre-exist [their] possible utterance” (Cain, 1993, p. 83), or that have been “lived but not yet languaged” (Frost et. al., 2014, p. 135). If this is possible, then erotic lived embodiment could provide women with a path toward a new way of understanding their experiences that is not based solely on dominant discourses; it could act as a compass, reorienting women toward what they feel in their bodies rather than what society prescribes that they should feel or do. Lived embodiment could be a generative force that creates extra-discursive psychological spaces for women, which could in turn be shared with others, creating counter-discourses that fracture the hegemony of dominant discourses.¹⁹

A major contribution of feminism has been to regard the lived experiences of women as crucial in any explanation of a phenomenon (Grosz, 1994). Elizabeth Grosz notes that Merleau-Ponty’s account of lived embodied experience is therefore useful to feminists:

His emphasis on lived experience and perception, his focus on the body-subject, has resonances with what may arguably be regarded as feminism’s major contribution to the

¹⁹ I do not mean to imply here that lived embodied experiences are necessarily “authentic” or “true” even in their extra-discursive forms. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) says, “Experience cannot be taken as an unproblematic given, a position through which one can judge knowledges, for experience is of course implicated in and produced by various knowledges and social practices” (p. 94). Still, following Grosz (1994) and other feminists (e.g., Irigaray & Burke, 1980; Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981; Lorde, 1984), I believe that historically, women’s embodied knowledges and willful attention thereto, particularly for women of color and queer women, have been marginalized and subjugated, and so it remains of primary importance to feminist goals to re-center such sensory and experiential knowledge as a means toward individual experiences of agency and power, as well as toward resisting sexist, racist, and heterosexist oppression (see below).
production and structure of knowledges – its necessary reliance on lived experience, on experiential acquaintance as a touchstone or criterion of the validity of theoretical postulates. … I would contend that without some acknowledgment of the formative role of experience in the establishment of knowledges, feminism has no grounds from which to dispute patriarchal norms (p. 94).

Indeed, as Grosz (1994) suggests, feminists have historically privileged women’s embodied sensations as a place from which to interrogate oppressive discourses (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976; Irigaray & Burke, 1980; Kristeva, Jardine & Blake, 1981; Lorde, 1984). Kristeva, for instance, looks to the body as a source of women’s knowledge that could be beyond language, because language itself is rooted in discourse. She urges women to attempt “to break the code, to shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the social contract” (Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981, p. 24-25). Here, Kristeva’s reference to the “unnameable” is consistent with Cain’s (1993) understanding of the extra-discursive. Kristeva refers to an embodied experience that cannot be named, and suggests that by working to access this knowledge that is “repressed by the social contract” (i.e., dominant discourse), women can explode current hegemonic discourses (“break the code”) in favor of “specific discourse[s] closer to the body.” In other words, Kristeva argues that women’s lived embodied experiences can act as an extra-discursive seed from which counter-discourses can grow and resist the regulation of dominant discourses.

Foucault also suggests that resistance to dominant discourses, particularly in the realm of sexuality, can be accomplished by returning to a focus on lived embodiment (Jagose, 2010). In *The History of Sexuality*, he writes, “The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality, ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” (Foucault, 1978,
p. 157). Similarly, in an interview conducted in 1975, he says, “We must invent with the body, with its elements, surfaces, volumes, and thicknesses, a nondisciplinary eroticism – that of a body in a volatile and diffused state, with its chance encounters and unplanned pleasures” (Foucault, 2000, p. 227). Foucault thus echoes the calls of his feminist contemporaries to resist the regulation of dominant discourses of sexuality (what he calls “the deployment of sexuality”) by “rallying” around “bodies and pleasures.” Since Foucault argues that inscribed bodies are the ultimate site of sexual regulation (see above), he believes that the only possible “counterattack” is an experience of the body as “volatile,” “unplanned,” and “pleasurable” – that is, not entirely contained by power. Though he does not expand on the notion, Foucault’s reference to “a nondisciplinary eroticism” again harkens to Cain’s (1993) notion of the extra-discursive as generative of counter-discourses of resistance. He sees the body as “inventive” – it can create new possibilities that may not be available within prevailing norms.

Taken a step further, Audre Lorde (1984) suggests that women’s embodied sexual pleasure is explicitly political. That is, she argues that when women focus on the capabilities of their bodies to provide them with sexual pleasure, they are empowered not just sexually, but in an endless number of other areas of their lives:

Once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives (p. 57).

For Lorde, the knowledge women gain from their lived erotic embodiment is a vessel for empowerment in all areas of their lives. She argues that once women sense the power of their
own eroticism – “that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of” – they are able to apply this awareness of bodily capability to all other “aspects of [their] existence.” Sexual rights activist Cesnabmihilo Dorothy Aken’ova (as presented in McClelland & Fine, 2008a) provides an example of this sort of empowerment in her analysis of the politics of women’s sexual entitlement in Nigeria. She reverses the traditional argument for women’s sexual liberation when she proposes: “If a Nigerian woman dares to ask for an orgasm, who knows, maybe next, she’ll demand clean water” (as quoted in McClelland & Fine, 2008a, p. 87). Taking up Lorde’s (1984) suggestion that erotic knowledge can empower women in areas far beyond their sexuality, Aken’ova argues that a woman who knows her body’s capacity for blissful sexual embodiment may be more likely to make additional political demands. McClelland and Fine (2008a) therefore write:

Although the right to sexual pleasure has long been held as a potential outcome of women’s rights, it may be more powerful and practical to place bodily pleasure at the center of a rights campaign. When someone is able to negotiate what they want within themselves (and perhaps with a partner), these skills start a ripple in the water that continues to travel outward (p. 87).

Perhaps, then, women’s embodied experiences of extra-discursive solitary masturbation could be like pebbles that create ripples in the water. When women willfully seek sexual pleasure and knowledge on their own terms, when they are able to create that pleasure for themselves and experience that pleasure in their bodies despite restrictive cultural mandates, they may also create alternative ways of experiencing and understanding themselves and their bodies. These new personal understandings are also political. When women feel entitled to their own embodied pleasure through masturbation, they may also feel entitled to pleasure in partnered sexual
encounters and pleasure that goes beyond the sexual. They may share their embodied knowledge with other women, normalizing their experiences in a supportive community and creating counter-discourses. In these ways, women’s lived experiences of solitary masturbation can perhaps be sites of individual willful subjectivity (Ahmed, 2014), personal experiences of agency and power, and resistance to discourses of oppression.

**Current State of the Research Literature on Women’s Masturbation**

Using the historical and theoretical contexts I have presented above, in this section I review the relevant current research literature on women’s solitary masturbation. Importantly, the vast majority of the research presented here is based on quantitative surveys, and such research may provide limited insight into women’s subjective experiences of solitary masturbation. However, a few studies have employed qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups, and so I highlight the findings of these studies in particular.

The majority of women report masturbating at sometime throughout their lives (Arafat & Cotton, 1974; Davidson & Moore, 1994; Greenberg & Archambault, 1973; Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991; Kinsey, 1953; Smith, Rosenthal, & Reichler, 1996) with recent estimates surpassing 80% (Bowman, 2014; Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Herbenick et al., 2010; Mark, 2011). Perhaps because men and boys have easier visual access to their genitalia, and/or because men continue to be constructed as more sexual than women, higher percentages of men report masturbating in their lifetimes than women (Gerressu et al., 2008; Higgins et al., 2010; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2010; Pinkerton et al, 2003), and this is true both for adults

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(Herbenick et al., 2010) and adolescents (Fortenberry et al., 2010; Robbins et al., 2011; Smith et al., 1996).

Some research has compared the masturbation frequency of women of different races and sexual orientations. Despite the stereotype that Black women are hypersexual compared to white women (Collins, 2000, 2005), some research suggests that white women masturbate more frequently than Black women (Das, 2007; Gerressu et al., 2008; Laumann et al., 1994; Shulman & Horne, 2003). Julie Shulman & Sharon Horne (2003) suggest that strong moral proscriptions against masturbation in Black cultures may help explain these disparities (Wilson, 1986), but other studies have found no differences between Black and white women (Bancroft, Long, & McCabe, 2011; Fisher, 1980). Aniruddha Das (2007) also found that white women masturbate more than Asian/Pacific Islander women, perhaps reflecting the more conservative views toward talking about sexuality that are present in some Asian communities (Kim & Ward, 2007).

Lesbian and sexual minority women report masturbating more frequently than heterosexual women (Gerressu et al., 2008; Herbenick et al., 2010; Laumann et al., 1994; Træen, Stigum, & Sørensen, 2002). Perhaps the experience of having to manage one stigmatized aspect of sexuality – a non-heterosexual sexual orientation – makes it less challenging to navigate another – masturbation. Sexual minority women also have their first orgasm at a younger age than heterosexual women (Træen, Stigum, & Sørensen, 2002), and report more frequent orgasms during masturbation than heterosexual women (Coleman, Hoon, & Hoon, 1983). While most women prefer to masturbate by providing themselves with clitoral stimulation (Davis, Blank, Lin, & Bonillas, 1996; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Leff & Israel, 1983), perhaps heterosexual women are more concerned with recreating a penetrative sexual experience than sexual minority women, and this could present a barrier to orgasms. Supporting this theory, Breanne Fahs and Elena
Frank (2014) found that some women worry that their practice of clitoral stimulation is somehow abnormal because they imagine that “normal” women masturbate through penetration, but this concern was much more common among heterosexual women than sexual minority women.

Women report higher rates of masturbation if they have higher levels of education (Das, Parish, & Laumann, 2009; Gerressu et al., 2008; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003), higher social class (Gerressu et al., 2008), lower religiosity (Das, 2007; Gerressu et al., 2008), more knowledge of clitoral anatomy (Das, Parish, & Laumann, 2009) and more liberal attitudes about sex (Das, Parish, & Laumann, 2009; Gerressu et al., 2008). Contrary to popular belief, Gerressu and colleagues (2008) found that the more frequently women are having partnered sex, the more frequently they masturbate (this trend is reversed among men). This may be at least partly due to the difficulty women have in reaching orgasm from penile-vaginal intercourse alone, since many women report feeling the need to masturbate to compensate for unfulfilling partnered sex (Das, Parish, & Laumann, 2009; Fahs & Frank, 2014), but perhaps it also reflects women’s greater comfort with and entitlement to their own sexual desires (Gerresu et al., 2008).

Women report masturbating for a variety of additional reasons, and may masturbate for different reasons at different times. Women masturbate to relieve sexual tension (Bowman, 2014; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Phillipsohn & Hartmann, 2009), to relax (Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Phillipsohn & Hartmann, 2009), for pleasure (Bowman, 2014; Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Hite, 1976; Laumann et al., 1994; Phillipsohn & Hartmann, 2009; Thompson, 1990), as a substitute for partnered sex (Bowman, 2014; Das, 2007; Das, Parish, & Laumann, 2009).

Incidentally, humans are not the only primates who apparently masturbate for relaxation and/or pleasure. Females in at least 50 primate species have been observed masturbating, and bonobos, for instance, use tools to masturbate such as sticks for penetration (Thomsen & Sommer, 2015).
and to learn about their bodies, desires, and sensations (Bowman, 2014; Thompson, 1990; Tiefer, 1996). Women report that learning about their own anatomy and sexual responses increases their sexual confidence and comfort with their bodies – both alone and with partners (Dodson, 1996; Hite, 1976). In a recent study, I also found that various motivations to masturbate predict women’s feelings of sexual empowerment, namely masturbating for pleasure or to learn about one’s body/pleasure (Bowman, 2014). Perhaps when women are able to move beyond the stigma associated with masturbation to learn about their own bodies and pleasures, they are demonstrating the determination, agency and will that feels positive and powerful to them.

Though women feel more stigma and guilt about masturbating than men (Higgins et al., 2010; Kaestle & Allen, 2011), and feel more negative attitudes toward a sexual partner masturbating than men (Clark & Wiederman, 2000; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003), most women believe that masturbation is a healthy behavior (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2003), and many report that it is very important to them (Bowman, 2014). However, less is known about how women navigate this tension between stigmatization and beliefs that masturbation is healthy and important; Christine Kaestle and Katherine Allen (2011) suggest that women (and men) may go through a developmental process in which they learn that masturbation is simultaneously pleasurable and stigmatized, and navigate this tension by eventually coming to see masturbation as normal and acceptable. I explore the tension identified by Kaestle and Allen (2011) and other researchers (e.g., Hogarth & Ingham, 2009) in this dissertation so as to better understand how women navigate such paradoxical realities.

Masturbation has also been linked to a number of positive psychological outcomes for women. Women who masturbate tend to have higher self-esteem (Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991;
Smith et al., 1996), more positive body image (Shulman & Horne, 2003; Wiederman & Pryor, 1997), greater sexual satisfaction (Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991), and better sexual function overall (Herbenick et al., 2009; Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991). Sharon Horne and Melanie Zimmer-Gembeck (2005) found that late adolescents and young women (ages 16-20) who masturbate fare better in terms of several sexual subjectivity measures including sexual body esteem, entitlement to sexual pleasure, and efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure. Though some women report feeling shame or guilt after masturbating (Arafat & Cotton, 1974; Bowman, 2014; Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Laumann et al., 1994; Robinson, Bockting, & Harrell, 2002), many also feel empowered (Bowman, 2014), happy (Das, 2007; Philippsohn & Hartmann, 2009), and satisfied (Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991; Philippsohn & Hartmann, 2009). Harriet Hogarth & Roger Ingham (2009) found in their interviews with 16-18 year old British girls/women that masturbation often felt to participants like something special and validating – a means of feeling good about oneself; one woman said, for example, “I felt a million dollars and then so calm … It was as if I had at last done something just for me. … It was mine and no one else’s” (p. 563-564).

A very small body of research has explored girls’ experiences with solitary masturbation. When asked about masturbation, many girls have difficulty answering (Tolman, 2002), or report mixed feelings of pleasure and shame (Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Although most girls report that their parents did not discuss masturbation with them (Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013), many somehow deduced that their parents wouldn’t approve of it (Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Girls generally report knowing very little about masturbation, particularly in terms of how a woman might masturbate and why (Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013). For example, in Anne-Frances Watson & Alan McKee’s (2013) focus groups with Australian young
people, aged 14-16, they found that girls were often very confused about the mechanics of women’s masturbation; one girl asked, somewhat rhetorically, “How does a girl even do that?” and then later clarified that she thought it was harder for girls to masturbate than boys because girls have to deal with “not knowing … what to do” (p. 456-457).

Girls also tend to report thinking that masturbation is gross (Watson & McKee, 2013), and, as mentioned above, because it is viewed as a substitute for partnered sex, it is also seen as “desperate” and shameful (Watson & McKee, 2013). Some girls also report thinking women’s masturbation is “lesbian-y” because a woman is touching female genitalia (Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013). Such attitudes may reflect the social deprioritization of women’s sexual pleasure and the traditional construction of women’s sexuality in terms of its function for men (McClelland & Fine, 2008a; Rich, 1980). Though girls rarely discuss masturbation with their friends (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Smith et al., 1996; Watson & McKee, 2013), Hogarth and Ingham (2009) found that girls with positive attitudes toward masturbation tended to feel more comfortable talking about sex, including their own desire and pleasure. In contrast, the same study provided evidence that girls who expressed negative attitudes toward masturbation tended to speak about their bodies as belonging to their boyfriends, and did not discuss their own desires or pleasures.

Young people whose parents are more open about discussing sexuality are more likely to report having masturbated (Smith et al., 1996), and have more positive attitudes toward masturbation (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009). Adult women often report wanting to be more open with their children (if/when they have them) about sexuality than their parents were with them (Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Wyatt & Riederle, 1994), and wanting to talk to their children at younger ages than they were when their parents talked to them (El-Shaieb & Wurtele, 2009).
However, in Muna El-Shaieb & Sandy Wurtele’s (2009) survey of parents of young children, 28% reported that they would never discuss masturbation with their children.

Despite this silence and confusion, a few girls are able to clearly articulate that they masturbate and feel that it is important to them (Thompson, 1990; Tolman, 2002). Of those girls who report masturbating in adolescence, the majority report that they taught themselves about masturbation (Arafat & Cotton, 1974; Smith et al., 1996). Girls also learn what little they know about the practice from media such as magazines, books, movies and TV (Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Smith et al., 1996; Watson & McKee, 2013) or from sexual partners (Kaestle & Allen, 2011). In Sharon Thompson’s (1990) interviews with 400 American teenage girls, she found that some girls playfully explored their pleasurable embodied sensations when they were as young as five (“It all of a sudden dawned on me that I had all these amazing nerves down there and that was a sense of all these weird feelings” [p. 352]), and others expressed curiosity when they were slightly older about what an orgasm might feel like and took it upon themselves to find out (“It was a combination of curiosity, as in ‘what does this feel like?’ because … I read about masturbation. And I was wondering what an orgasm felt like. So I decided, I have to try this” [p. 351]). These brief but powerful moments of listening to the sensations in one’s body and of stubbornly defying stigmas in favor of pleasure appear to me to be instances of what Ahmed (2014) calls willful subjectivity; it is here – in these compelling sites of social fissure – that I explore women’s subjective experiences of solitary masturbation in this dissertation.

The Current Research

In this introduction, I have provided historical, theoretical, and empirical contexts for my inquiry into women’s solitary masturbation experiences throughout their lives. Specifically, with
this dissertation, I aim to investigate the following research question: *How (in what ways and by what means) do social power and embodied knowledge interact to inform women’s solitary masturbation experiences?*

In the chapters that follow, after detailing my methodology, I will present findings from my analyses of semi-structured interviews with 30 adult women. In Chapter Three, I explore the psychological mechanisms underlying women’s frequent reporting that, particularly in their early masturbation experiences, they felt confused about a tension between their embodied pleasure and a shaming silence. In Chapter Four, I examine one particular type of early masturbation experience more closely – that of pre-pubescent children who remember masturbating before they knew the name/meanings of their behavior – to suggest that these *extra-discursive* experiences could provide a brief but important moment of freedom from oppressive norms. In Chapter Five, I examine the means by which so many women in my sample narrated a shift in their attitudes toward masturbation from confusion and shame to a rejection of negative messages and an embracing of their embodied pleasures. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I explore some important ideological threads that weave themselves throughout this dissertation, including discussions of relationality, extra-discursive embodiment and the move into language, and the possibilities of willful subjectivity (Ahmed, 2014).
Chapter Two: Methods
As described above, in this dissertation, I seek to explore the following research question:

**How (in what ways and by what means) do social power and embodied knowledge interact to inform women’s solitary masturbation experiences?**

To investigate this question of subjectivity, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 adult women in which I asked participants to tell me stories about their masturbation experiences throughout their lives. Then, through a combination of thematic and narrative analyses, I examined the ways in which women talked about their solitary masturbation experiences to better understand how social power and lived embodiment were braided together in these experiences.

In this chapter, I first discuss my rationale for collecting and analyzing narratives in this dissertation. Then, I justify my methodological decisions and procedures including the following: why I chose to include a sorting task prior to interviewing participants; how I recruited my sample and whom I sought to recruit; the study procedures I implemented including a demographic survey, a card sorting task, and a semi-structured interview; and my approach to the qualitative data analysis. This study received approval from the Hunter College’s Institutional Review Board.

**Narratives as a Method of Investigating Individual-level and Society-level Meanings**

Through the use of narrative methodologies, I seek to bridge the individual and societal levels of analysis, to investigate how people and their social worlds are co-constructed (Chase, 2009; Gilligan 2015; Hammack, 2008; Josselson, 2013). When individuals construct narratives, they retrospectively make meaning of their experiences in a specific context, reorganizing events into a meaningful whole by incorporating their points of view, emotions, thoughts, and interpretations (Chase, 2009; Haug, 2008; Josselson, 2013). A person’s “experience” is always
discursively constructed (Haug, 2008; Josselson, 2013; Scott, 1991). With narratives, social psychologists can investigate, first of all, how individuals construct and engage with dominant discourses (Foucault, 1978; Haug, 2008), and second, how and why individuals deviate from those discourses (Hammack, 2008; Haug, 2008). In this way, researchers can learn which dominant discourses are (re)produced by individuals, how these discourses operate, and the processes by which individuals may question and/or challenge those discourses, thereby leading to potential social change (Chase, 2009; Hammack, 2008; Haug, 2008; Josselson, 2013; Plummer, 1995).

However, this option for resistance remains always already tempered by individual experiences of identity threat (Hammack, 2008). That is, because group membership remains an important aspect of individuals’ sense of self, the threat of undermining that group membership via excessive deviation from the norms of that group may motivate individuals to conform their narratives to dominant discourses. In the case of this project, for example, the group “women” is socially defined by the norms of femininity, but femininity and its norms often differ by race, social class, sexual orientation, or other social factors, and so an intersectional approach to interpreting women’s narratives is imperative. A woman’s narrations of her experiences are rooted in her actual or perceived adherence to the norms of her group(s), and these narrations may therefore sit in some relation to those norms. Thus, narrative researchers must always remember that narratives are “socially situated interactive performances…produced in this particular setting, for this particular audience, for these particular purposes” (Chase, 2009, p. 215), and not think of participants’ narratives as any sort of “authentic gaze into the soul of another” (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 305; see also Gilligan, 2015; Josselson, 2013; Plummer, 1995). Because the process of collecting narratives requires such attention to
intersectional group contexts, it allows researchers to explore not just the variability between groups, but also the variability within groups.

I chose to ask women to tell me stories about their experiences for several reasons. First, when people tell stories about their experiences, they are able to describe a concrete situation in their own words, from their own perspective, including the aspects they find important, and this process allows the participant to feel ownership of what is being said, while also allowing the researcher to hear unexpected and/or counterintuitive nuances in the narratives (see, e.g., Burns, Futch, & Tolman, 2011). Second, the stories that participants tell provide a starting place from which the interviewer can explore further – by following up with the participant – additional aspects of the experience such as contextual factors, emotional reactions, embodied sensations, and other thoughts about the experience that may not have been included in the first telling of the story (Tolman, 2002).

Finally, through an analysis of the stories participants tell, researchers can look beyond what is said, and examine how individuals recount their experiences and tell their stories, as a means to more deeply understand what these experiences mean to participants in context. That is, the way an individual positions herself in relation to the social context in which she lives and has lived provides a window into her understandings of larger structural social forces such as gender, race, and sexuality. To “hear” the nuances of negotiating such power structures beneath the surface structure of a narrative, Carol Gilligan and colleagues (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982, 2015) provide a method of “listening” to narratives that encourages researchers to pay attention to several interrelated factors: how a participant positions herself in relation to her story and broader discourses; what multiple “voices” may be present in a narrative such as an “I” or first-person voice and/or additional voices such as more distant or general “you” voices
and/or voices that reproduce dominant social norms; and what the contextual features of a
narrative are, including the presence/absence of other individuals, past experiences, and social
location.

Frigga Haug (1987; 2008) has called the continual (re)construction of past experiences
*Memory Work*, and she argues that whether or not people’s narratives indicate “how it really
happened” is beside the point (as she says, “Memory itself should be conceived of as contested”
[2008, p. 538]; see also Josselson [2004] and the notion of reading narratives with a
hermeneutics of suspicion). Instead, the purpose of asking people to tell their stories and the
critical analysis of these stories is to examine how structures of power work in people’s lives,
and how people may conform to and/or resist them:

In working with our memories, we are trying to do two things: to find out how we
actively conform with existing power relationships; and also, where in the past there are
‘sparks of hope’ in which we recognize ourselves ‘as the ones who are meant’. … The
result of such Memory Work is thus not rectifying or establishing the correct image;
neither is it advice on how to get the correct perspective or how far removed one is from
it. Perhaps it is more than anything restless people with new questions, who are in a
process with the intention of moving themselves out of a position of subalternity (2008,
p. 538; see also Josselson, 2013).

I take up Gilligan’s and Haug’s understandings of the purpose of and approach to narrative
inquiry in this dissertation, examining women’s narratives not just for what they say, but for how
they say it, and for what their utterances might mean if they are in a continual process of
positioning themselves as agents of their own lives.
Q Sorting as a Method of Providing Language for and Comfort with a Sensitive Topic

Interviewing women about their solitary masturbation experiences presents a specific challenge: masturbation is an action that can be – and often is – experienced without words. Women can masturbate their whole lives and never talk about it with anyone. In this unique situation, language to describe experiences with solitary masturbation may not be readily available to participants. As David Frost and colleagues might say, women’s solitary masturbation could be an “experience that [has] been lived but not yet languaged” (2014, p. 135; see also McClelland & Fine, 2008b). Q methodology – or for the purposes of this dissertation, just the Q sort portion of the larger methodology (I also refer to this as the sorting task) – provides a way to investigate issues of subjectivity while also attending to the potential problem of missing language (Brown, 1993; McClelland, 2014; Watts & Stenner, 2005). In this study, I presented participants with a wide range of attitudes about women’s masturbation with which to engage subjectively, thereby giving participants “permission” to think about the topic in whatever way felt right to them. This strategy was designed to allow participants to develop a certain level of comfort with a rarely discussed and stigmatized topic (Charmaz, 2006; McClelland & Fine, 2008b). Furthermore, by providing participants with examples of language used to discuss masturbation, this sorting task was also designed to help participants articulate their experiences during the interview that followed.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I chose not to analyze the sorted cards using Q methodology, because the type of question such an analysis would answer (e.g., What distinct factors/perspectives help to explain women’s thoughts and feelings toward masturbation?) is different from the question I explore in this dissertation. Instead, the sorting task was designed to be a sort of warm-up activity that would provide participants with language for and comfort with
the sensitive topic of masturbation, so that the subsequent interviews would be less intimidating for participants, and would elicit more fruitful data for the research project. Though I do not present the results of the sorting task here nor do I present an analysis of this data using Q methodology, the task remains an important aspect of my methodology in this dissertation, because it provided participants with a certain degree of familiarity with the topic before I asked them to talk about their own experiences. I thus include a thorough description of the task in this chapter.

Q sorting is a task in which participants are given a stack of cards with one statement printed on each, and are asked to sort the statements along a continuum from “most disagree” to “most agree,” in response to a general prompt question (see Appendices 4-5). Prompt questions are written in such a way that all statements represent answers to that question (Watts & Stenner, 2005), and so for this study, the prompt question read, “What are your thoughts and feelings about women’s masturbation?” I developed statements about women’s masturbation along a number of dimensions including reasons why women masturbate, emotional feelings about women’s masturbation, attitudes toward masturbation, masturbation frequency and methods, and masturbation and relationships (see Appendix 4 for full list of statements). The statements were developed through examinations of the academic literature, media such as magazines, TV and Internet resources, and discussions with colleagues (Watts & Stenner, 2005). The statements are broadly representative of known beliefs about women’s solitary masturbation, an important criterion for this methodology (Brown, 1993; Watts & Stenner, 2005). The statements were written with roughly equal representation of positive views toward masturbation (e.g., “Even if they don’t say so out loud, most women like masturbing”) and negative views (e.g., “Women should feel guilty if they masturbate”), and slightly fewer that were written with a neutral
valence (e.g., “Masturbation can be frustrating”). Though these valences are themselves subjective, they were nevertheless useful in the creation of a broadly representative set of statements. The sorting task was piloted with nine people, who confirmed that the statements were straightforward and not missing any crucial common thoughts or feelings toward women’s masturbation.

Who I Am in this Research

Conducting feminist qualitative research requires the researcher to be self-aware. In this dissertation, I have attempted to understand the experiences of others and then analyze those experiences to tell a story that I have chosen to tell; I have interpreted and (re)constructed stories every step of the way (Chase, 2009; Fine, 1994; Riessman, 1993). It is therefore crucial that I be honest and explicit about my own subjectivities – my identities, values, assumptions, and expectations – and the ways they may inform my work, because knowledge creation and people’s understandings of the world are mediated by the self (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007).

I am a white, middle class, queer, cisgender, feminine-presenting, young, able-bodied, educated, American woman with much social and structural support; in short, I am very privileged. I consider myself a feminist who values knowledge, compassion, generosity, self-care, difficult respectful conversation, and radical (re)imaginings of our social world for progress toward social justice. I believe that a person’s sexuality is a key component of her self and that a woman can be fettered or freed depending, in part, on how she experiences her sexuality (and in oppressive contexts, how she experiences her sexuality is not entirely up to her). I believe it is the duty of privileged people like me to do the difficult work of learning to see what is often made invisible to us; I must question dominant rhetoric that works to oppress, examine the ways
in which privilege operates and I benefit from it, and listen, listen, listen. I believe that I cannot ever truly understand the struggles of those less privileged than I, but that it is nevertheless my responsibility to learn and to keep learning, to improve on my (inevitable) mistakes, and to stand beside my sisters and brothers in solidarity. I believe people never have to stop growing.

Each of these identities and values, taken separately and together, may have affected my work on this project. I chose not to divulge any information about myself that was not already readily apparent to participants (e.g., I did not inform them that I am queer), so as to avoid a focus on my identities and myself. Because I value self-care and believe that part of who a woman is rests in her sexuality, I have a particular investment in solitary masturbation as a means to greater self-understanding, self-love, and self-liberation. This investment may have made it challenging for me to hear the ways in which masturbation could be experienced negatively or in more banal ways. My privileged social positions may also have made it more difficult for me to understand the stories of women less privileged than I. For instance, as a white woman, I may have had difficulty hearing the ways in which women of color’s experiences of masturbation were racialized. But while I do not believe in Women’s Experience as some sort of homogenous phenomenon, I also do not believe a priori that women necessarily differ along certain social dimensions. I therefore carefully approached this work open to whatever differences or similarities I might find both within and/or between groups, and listened closely – through a critical lens – to women’s words as the compass that guided my analyses and claims.

Sample and Recruitment

Thirty adult women were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Because age is a factor in women’s masturbation experiences (Herbenick et al., 2010), I restricted
recruitment for this study to a roughly 10-year age range spanning from 25-35 years old (see sample details in Tables 1-2). I recruited this age group because it is beyond emerging adulthood (generally defined as the developmental period from age 18-25), which is a time of much sexual experimentation and learning (Arnett, 2000); I was thus able to interview women who could draw on their experiences in this period of their lives, without currently being in its throes.

The recruitment of a diverse sample in terms of race and sexual orientation was also a top priority, because very little research on women’s masturbation has incorporated an analysis of intersectional identities, and a robust analysis should incorporate the widest possible range of experiences. This recruitment strategy was also meant to ensure inclusion in the data of meaningful structural differences known to be salient to women’s sexuality (e.g., Collins, 2005; Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Pyke & Johnson, 2003). I thus used critical theories of race and sexuality to analyze diverse women’s stories within a context of their past experiences and relationships, as well as their current identities (see Analytic Approach below). As in other areas of social psychology, much research on women’s masturbation relies on samples of primarily white, heterosexual, and college-aged participants (e.g., Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Wiederman & Pryor, 1997), and therefore cannot evaluate the experiences of women of color, sexual minority women and/or sexual minority women of color. Even studies that incorporate more diverse samples often stop short of considering how multiple intersectional subjugated identities (such as

22 The final sample included two women who fell outside this range: Eve was 24 at the time of the interview, and Amy Today was 41. Though I had specified the age range I was seeking in my recruitment materials, prospective participants may not have read these materials closely before volunteering, and I did not collect demographic data until participants arrived for the interviews. Because these two participants gave their time and thoughtful responses to sensitive interview questions, and because their responses did not seem to differ significantly from the rest of the sample in terms of their attitudes or behaviors, I included them in my final sample.
gender, race, and sexual orientation) can work together to produce unique experiences and meanings. For example, since Black women in the US are stereotyped as sexually masculine and out of control (Collins, 2000, 2005), the experience of buying a vibrator may feel different to Black women than to white women. Taken a step further, for a Black queer woman, sexist, racist, and homophobic discourses may come into play simultaneously. That is, traditional gender norms define women’s sexuality in relation to men (Rich, 1980), and Black women are stereotyped as hypersexual (Collins, 2005), so Black sexual minority women may experience their solitary masturbation in a way that incorporates these multiple subjugated social locations. Without an intersectional analysis, this critical deeper understanding is often overlooked. Women’s understandings of their masturbation may also be related to other life experiences and current/past sexual relationships (e.g., sex education, sexual trauma). Though my sample was too small to make claims about group comparisons (e.g., how Black women compare to white women in their solitary masturbation experiences), and in any case, my analysis indicated just as much variation within groups as across groups, I nevertheless contextualized women’s narratives within other relevant experiences and relationships, and worked to meaningfully incorporate racially and sexually diverse women’s perspectives both theoretically (through a contextualization and analysis of women’s multiple social positions) and methodologically (through purposive sampling). I monitored the demographic characteristics of participants throughout recruitment, with the target participation rates of 50% sexual minority women, and 25% Asian, 25% Black, 25% Latina, and 25% white women.

Participants for this study were recruited using three methods: 1) by contacting a pool of participants from a previous online survey study (Bowman, 2014) who had indicated interest in being contacted in the future for a research interview; 2) via snowball sampling (see below); and
3) via personal and professional networking (see below). Regarding the first recruitment strategy, as a part of a national survey study I published in 2014, participants created a code name and then re-entered this code name into a separate survey along with their email address if they were interested in being contacted in the future to participate in an interview. This strategy provided confidentiality to these survey participants, and also made it possible to link up participants’ responses in the initial survey to their email addresses for future recruitment. The other two recruitment strategies are described in more detail below.

From the previous study, 354 of the 765 women in the total sample indicated interest and provided their email addresses. For the present study, the email addresses of these 354 interested participants were linked to their data in the previous study using their code names so that a purposive sampling strategy could be employed. The recruitment pool was refined by removing participants who: indicated never having masturbated; did not live within the New York City metro area (so that interviews could be conducted in person); were missing residency data, race data, and/or sexual orientation data; had a birth year that did not fall within the range of 1979-1989; and had email addresses that were recognized in a search of my Gmail account (indicating that they were somehow personally connected to me). After this initial data cleaning, 60 participants remained in the recruitment pool.

Between 12-18 potential participants were contacted via individual emails per week, with a follow-up email sent to those who had not responded approximately two weeks after the initial email. If there was no response to this second email, no further follow-up emails were sent. The subject of the initial email was, “Are you still interested in being interviewed for sexuality research?” and the subject of the follow-up email was, “Following up: Would you still like to be interviewed?” The body of the email reminded potential participants of their previous
participation in an online study about “yourself, your experiences, and your opinions about sexuality and sexual behavior,” thanked them for this participation, and offered them an opportunity to read the published article that resulted from their participation. The email also asked if they were still interested in participating in an interview about their “experiences and attitudes toward women’s sexuality.” This language did not reference masturbation so as to reduce the possibility of sampling bias, such that only those who had a particular interest in discussing masturbation would agree to participate (see recruitment email in Appendix 1). Of the 60 previous participants who were emailed, 16 scheduled an interview and consented to participate in the present study (27% response rate).

Having started with this strategy of recruitment via the previous survey study, I noticed my emerging sample (10 interviews conducted) was limited in one particular way – the vast majority of participants I had recruited were white (7 out of 10 were white and an additional 2 were multiracial white). Therefore, in the implementation of my additional recruitment strategies (see below), I specifically targeted women of color so as to purposively attain a more racially diverse final sample.

Two additional recruitment strategies were implemented to increase the sample size and to increase participation by women of color: 1) a snowball sampling method was employed such that at the end of each interview, participants were handed a few postcard flyers (see postcard flyer in Appendix 2) and encouraged to tell friends about the study; and 2) several of my professional and personal contacts shared the postcard flyer or general information about the study with their networks. In utilizing this latter networking strategy, I specifically informed my networks that while I would gladly interview any women who fit the inclusion criteria (i.e., were 25-35 years old, had masturbated at least once in their lives, and could be interviewed in person
in New York City), I was particularly interested in recruiting more women of color so as to
include the widest possible range of experiences. These strategies produced 14 additional
participants, for a total of 30 participants, and a more racially diverse final sample (see Tables 1-2 for demographic characteristics). I do not know which of these 14 additional participants came from which of these latter two recruitment strategies (i.e., snowball sampling or networking),
because the participants emailed me with their interest and I did not inquire as to how they heard
about the study.

I chose to interview thirty women because this sample size was likely to provide enough
data for the detection of common themes across women as well as the detection of unusual cases
from the margins (Braun & Clarke, 2006; McClelland, 2016). Some journals that publish
qualitative research have begun to provide guidelines for minimum sample sizes for qualitative
studies, and these guidelines are similar to the sample size I recruited (e.g., 25-30 is the
minimum in Archives of Sexual Behavior’s policy; Dworkin, 2012).

**Study Procedures**

The study procedures took place in an office at the Graduate Center, CUNY in New York
City. I greeted participants in the lobby of the Graduate Center, signed them in at the security
desk, and tried to make them feel comfortable and welcome with cheerful conversation as we
walked to the office. Upon participants’ arrival at the office, I closed the door, and the study
procedures were completed in private with only the participant and me in the room. Participants
provided informed consent to be interviewed and to have their interview audio-recorded, without
providing their names. They each also were asked to create a pseudonym for themselves to be
used in reporting. Only this pseudonym was used to identify participants throughout all study procedures, so as to protect the anonymity of participants.

The three components of the study were completed in a fixed order: a demographic survey, a card sorting task, and an interview (more detail below). The demographic survey was a paper and pencil survey that took participants less than 5 minutes to complete (see Appendix 3). Next, the card sorting task asked participants to sort 54 cards with statements about women’s masturbation on a nine-point scale from “most agree” to “most disagree” (see Appendices 4-5). The sorting task was completed while I was in the room and typically took 15-20 minutes to complete. Next, I interviewed participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and typically lasted between 60-90 minutes. Following the interview, participants were thanked and given a $30 Amazon gift card for participating. The entire procedure typically lasted 1.5-2 hours.

The three components of the procedure were completed in this order so as to ensure a consistent experience across participants, and also for methodological reasons. As detailed above, completing the sorting task before the interview provided participants the cognitive space to engage with the sensitive topic of masturbation on a more abstract and conceptual level before being asked to describe their own experiences and attitudes, and it also exposed participants to a wide range of attitudes about women’s masturbation so that they could feel comfortable talking about the topic in whatever way they liked (see above for more rationale for the Q methodology). Though the findings of the sorting task are not presented here, the sorting task procedure is still detailed below because its inclusion in the study likely influenced the subsequent interviews; participants sometimes referred to specific cards or the task in general during their interviews. A trace of the activity thus remains, and warrants description.
Demographic survey. Participants completed a brief, paper and pencil demographic survey that generally lasted five minutes or less (see Appendix 3). Participants were asked to write their pseudonym at the top of the survey, and then responded to open-ended items asking their birth date, race, and sexual orientation. They also provided information about their yearly household income, religion, religiosity, political orientation (on a seven-point Likert scale from “very liberal” to “very conservative”), education, and relationship status.

Card sorting task. Utilizing standard practices for Q sorting (see above), participants were asked to sort 54 statements in response to the following prompt: “What are your thoughts and feelings about women’s masturbation?” Participants were given the stack of randomly sorted statement cards and instructed to sort them on a nine-point Likert scale from “most disagree” to “most agree.” The sorting task was completed on a large board containing a quasi-normal distribution, which limited the number of cards that could be placed in each of the nine Likert points (see Appendix 5 for distribution). Across the top of the board was written, “What are your thoughts and feelings about women’s masturbation?” After providing instructions to participants, I encouraged them to ask any questions they might have at any time, and I sat in a chair on the other side of the room while they completed the task. I faced slightly away from participants, and made myself look busy reading, so as to give participants the space to think about the task without worrying about being watched. The task typically took 15-20 minutes to complete. After completing the task, I informed participants that I would record their responses later. I asked them to leave the cards as they had arranged them, and to come sit closer to me for the interview.

Semi-structured interview. Following the sorting task, I interviewed participants using a semi-structured format. Semi-structured interviewing is ideal for narrative research because it allows the researcher to approach the interview with a basic framework, but also allows enough
flexibility that the participant can disrupt that framework in favor of telling the stories she wants to tell (Chase, 2009). Participants were informed that the interview would be mostly about women’s solitary masturbation, and that they were free to skip any or all questions without penalty. After answering any remaining questions from the participants, we proceeded with the interview.

I designed the interview protocol (see Appendix 6) as a tool to elicit narratives from participants that could shed light on the norms and discourses women navigate in relation to their solitary masturbation experiences (see research questions in Introduction). Specifically, the questions in the interview protocol ask participants to discuss societal messages about women’s sexuality and masturbation, learning about masturbation, solitary masturbation experiences across life (i.e., first/early experiences, recent experiences, and how experiences may have changed throughout life), how solitary masturbation is related to interpersonal sexual relationships, and women’s attitudes about and interpretations of all of these. I ordered the questions in the protocol so as to ease participants from more abstract to more intimate questions; I began with questions about first hearing about masturbation and perceived social norms, and then moved on to questions about individual experiences with masturbation. As per my research question, I was most interested in participants’ thought processes and attitudes, and less so in their actual behaviors (e.g., detailed masturbatory methods). Therefore, after asking foundational questions such as “what happened” and “tell me about a time,” I followed up with prompts aimed at eliciting participants’ interpretations of these events such as, “what did/do you think about that?,” “what was/is that like for you?” and “how did/does that make you feel?” The protocol was pilot tested with four women (not included in the final sample) and modified according to their feedback. The final protocol contains specific questions and follow-up
prompts, but I remained flexible during the interviews and responded to participants’ unique thoughts and experiences (Padgett, 2008). Following each interview, I wrote a memo detailing my observations of the participant and the interview while they were fresh in my mind (Padgett, 2008). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

**Analytic Approach**

Following transcription, I analyzed the interview data by listening first for patterns (themes) across the interviews, and then by diving more deeply into individual narratives to attempt to understand the inner workings and mechanisms of these broader themes. Ruthellen Josselson (2013) explains: “as scholars, our aim is to begin with the phenomenology of experience, and then try to puzzle out the dynamics and structures that may account for that experience” (p. 17). In other words, the researcher must listen to participants’ stories as they are actually narrated (“phenomenology of experience”), and then, using interpretive webs of theory, work to understand the broader situations and implications of these experiences (“puzzle out [what] may account for that experience”). To investigate women’s solitary masturbation at these multiple levels, I therefore employed a combination of thematic and narrative analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Riessman, 1993).

First, I immersed myself in the data, reading and rereading interview transcripts without any analysis at all. Next, using qualitative analysis software (MAXQDA 12) and repeated readings, I coded excerpts within the transcripts by reading participants’ words very closely and developing codes based on their words that were as specific as possible. This coding was “grounded” in that the themes I developed were based on what participants actually said, but it was also inevitably informed by my base knowledge of the relevant literature in this area –
whatever my intentions, I acknowledge that I cannot escape my own biases. Nevertheless, this initial coding resulted in 4400 coded segments within over 800 codes, representing a wide range of attitudes, preferences, emotions, experiences, and practices. I then refined and consolidated this coding structure into overarching themes while remaining aware of relationships between themes and the dataset as a whole. I consulted with an interpretive community (Fish, 1980) made up of my advisor and other sexuality researchers to “check” my themes and interpretations during this process, and I created additional codes and themes as I identified them.

After refining the thematic structure, I chose representative exemplars of themes and subthemes, and analyzed these using a narrative analytical approach (Riessman, 1993). I had collected narrative accounts of women’s masturbation experiences in my interviews, and had specifically asked participants to “tell me about a time when…” they had, for example, a “really great experience masturbating,” or when they had “tried something new” (see Appendix 6 for full interview protocol). Participants told me elaborate stories filled with contextual details, moment-by-moment lessons learned, rich emotions, and emphatic opinions. Rather than analyzing these aspects of participants’ stories as “codes” or “themes,” I viewed them more as “threads” that wove throughout the stories that I had already placed into general themes. The analyses I present in this dissertation are a result of listening very closely to what participants actually said, allowing their understandings of their experiences to guide me, while also harnessing a hermeneutics of suspicion (Josselson, 2004) to situate what I heard them say within broader theories of social power. As Catherine Riessman (1993) would say, I was engaged in a process of “systematically interpreting their [participants’] interpretations” (p. 5).

I used a feminist poststructural approach in my analysis and did not presume that participants’ words reflected any sort of objective “truth;” instead, I recognized their language as
a sort of loop in which their words were both productive of meanings and reflective of meanings (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Riessman, 1993; Weedon, 1997). I therefore examined participants’ words in terms of the ways in which they (re)produced norms and discourses and the ways in which they broke open possibilities for willful subjectivities and embodiments (Ahmed, 2014). Though I approached my analysis with certain theoretical lenses in mind (see Introduction), I did not allow any particular theory or discourse to structure my analysis (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Instead, knowing what I know about women’s sexuality in a heterosexist, racist and patriarchal society (e.g., Collins, 2000; Rich, 1980; Weitz, 1989), I asked myself as I read the data repeatedly, “Given my lens, what do I hear this woman saying to me?” Often, this approach resulted in unexpected and nuanced findings, and I frequently moved back and forth between the thematic and narrative levels of analysis to pull together the larger stories I tell in this dissertation. Though I present careful, systematic analyses in this dissertation, I also acknowledge that alternative interpretations exist, and I do not claim my interpretations to be the only “true” or possible findings. I often present multiple possible interpretations of a given piece of data before justifying my adherence to one, thereby attempting to provide interpretations that are what Wendy Luttrell (2000) would call “good enough” – they are interpretations that I acknowledge can never be “perfect,” but can nevertheless be rigorous and self-reflective.

To maintain such a level of rigor and credibility, qualitative research requires somewhat different standards than those applied to quantitative work. Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985) provide a series of criteria by which researchers can work toward what they call trustworthiness, and by which they mean whether “the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to” (p. 290). I sought to conduct this research in a systematic and rigorous way, and so I worked to ensure both that I as a researcher and the research I have produced are deemed
trustworthy. Using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria as a model, I took several steps to maintain the trustworthiness of this work, including addressing issues of credibility (the confidence I/others feel in the “truth” of my findings), transferability (the applicability of my findings to other contexts), dependability (the likely consistency of my findings were this study to be repeated), and confirmability (the notion that this research is built on what participants say and is as unbiased as possible).

To ensure credibility, I immersed myself in the data by conducting all interviews myself and reading and rereading the transcripts. During the interviews, I asked participants multiple related questions that were designed to get at a particular idea from different angles, thereby triangulating my data collection. I also made use of an interpretive community to check any biases I may have inadvertently held and to confirm the adequacy of my interpretations (this also ensured dependability). To ensure transferability, I employ “thick description” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) when I present my findings, meaning that I include sufficient detail about the context and background of the findings and sufficient text from the interviews so that a reader can determine how generalizable my conclusions are to other contexts. To ensure dependability, I have reported here in great detail my methodological choices so that they can be assessed and replicated by my peers. Finally, to ensure confirmability, I have been continually reflexive in this research process, I have justified my methodological choices for transparency (see above), and I have acknowledged limitations in my work (see Chapter 6: Conclusion). I have interrogated my positionality as the principal investigator of this project and have reported potential biases here, and throughout this dissertation (see above).
How I Chose to Organize and Present the Findings

My intention in this dissertation is to provide a detailed analysis of women’s narratives about their solitary masturbation experiences, so as to develop insight into the ways and means by which social power and embodied knowledge inform these experiences. The analytical methods I have chosen – thematic and narrative analyses – presented me with a conundrum regarding how best to present my findings. As I described above, I initially used thematic analysis to organize my data, but upon undertaking narrative analysis of individual exemplars, I soon realized that each woman’s story was utterly unique and demanded attention to myriad contextual details. Though I often noticed patterns across the stories women told me, I could not ignore the complexity of their experiences, and felt compelled to dive deeply into the details of individual narratives; with this deep reading, I sought to represent women’s experiences as accurately and honestly as I could, and to explore as many possible avenues of social psychological analysis as were necessary. But the themes were there too, as were the narratives that reflected the theoretical literature, but were not necessarily common.

My solution to this dilemma of depiction is to present narratives with as much context and narrative/social analysis as possible, while also organizing the findings chapters loosely around the applicable themes that I constructed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Though I organize my chapters in this manner, I do not intend to suggest that the themes I present are somehow separate or unrelated to one another. Rather, I hope to provide clarity to the reader by presenting findings in a streamlined and intuitive fashion. Nevertheless, constructing my findings this way inevitably obscures some of the connections between them. For instance, in the first findings chapter (Chapter Three), I explore the tensions some women narrated between pleasure, shame, and confusion, and in the last findings chapter
(Chapter Five), I explore some women’s experiences of willfully resisting stigma through learning and embodiment – but this organization is actually somewhat arbitrary. Women’s narrations of guilt and confusion sat right alongside their narrations of confidence and bliss; the separation I have created in my chapter organization is misleading. However, in the interest of constructing a coherent framework for the main points I attempt to highlight, I have arranged my findings in this way. My humble request of the reader is that she not take my chapter organization as reflective of actual distinctions between these findings, but instead that she read each chapter in the context of the others.

In an effort to do justice to the many types of narratives I encountered, I have chosen to present the following types of narratives: 1) Narratives that are representative exemplars of findings that were frequent across participants; 2) Narratives that resonated with relevant extant theoretical and empirical literatures; and 3) Narratives that represent radical or remarkable voices from the margins (Braun & Clarke, 2006; McClelland, 2016). In many cases, I present narratives that represent more than one of these criteria. For each narrative, I provide demographic data about the participant including race, sexual orientation, and age, and introduce relevant past experiences as well. Italics within presented narratives indicate that the participant emphasized a word or phrase. Ellipses (i.e., “…”) indicate instances in which I deleted unrelated text. Each participant I interviewed is represented at least once in the three findings chapters. However, my use of quantified language (e.g., “some,” “several”) is deliberately imprecise because it is not my intention to designate certain experiences as widespread and others as uncommon; my sample is small and limited in a number of ways (see Chapter 6: Conclusion). Instead, my goal with this work is to illuminate the multiple, messy, contradictory, intricate, and novel ways that the
women I spoke to experience their solitary masturbation. And I have organized this dissertation with that end in mind.
Chapter Three: “I’m Like Really Lost Here”

Exploring the Tension between Embodied Pleasure and Discursive Shame in
Women’s Solitary Masturbation Experiences
Women’s agentic and independent expressions of sexuality continue to be socially stigmatized (e.g., Rich, 1980), and solitary masturbation is no exception (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Tiefer, 1998). Theorists have proposed that the stigma associated with women’s solitary masturbation is maintained, at least in part, by actively produced ignorance (Tuana, 2004). That is, because solitary masturbation is a practice that is in excess of the traditional functional definitions of women’s sexuality (i.e., reproduction and male sexual pleasure), it is constructed as dangerous and taboo; knowledge, education, and open discussion about it are often silenced (Fields, 2008; Jehl, 1994; McClelland & Fine, 2008a; Rich, 1980; Tuana, 2004; Vance, 1989; Weitz, 1989).

However, even in the face of such social stigmatization, the majority of American women do report masturbating (e.g., Herbenick et al., 2010), and experiences of embodied pleasure remain one of the primary reasons why (e.g., Bowman, 2014). I wonder how it is that such seemingly paradoxical realities can exist side by side for women. How do women navigate an understanding from their social worlds that solitary masturbation is considered taboo, while simultaneously attending to their own embodied sensations and desires? In what ways do women narrate being regulated by social discourses, and in what ways do they willfully deviate? In the analyses I present in this chapter, I examine women’s subjective experiences of solitary masturbation throughout their lives so as to better understand how stigmatizing social discourses and lived embodiment get braided together in this solitary sexual activity.

As might be expected, one of the primary findings of this investigation is that women in my sample frequently narrated confusion as a result of the tension between their embodied pleasure and feelings of shame or guilt. This tension and resultant confusion tended to occur early in these women’s masturbation histories, but because women reported starting to
masturbate at such diverse ages (ranging from before memory to adulthood), “early” here does not refer to a specific developmental period or age. After first presenting several examples of women’s experiences of confusion as a result of this tension, I then examine this confusion more closely, attempting to tease apart some specific ways in which these women feel confused. I find that some women seem to approach their early (and often, their first) masturbation experiences with certain expectations in mind, and that what they feel in their bodies during these experiences may not align with what they expected, which may in turn lead to confusion. But despite these feelings of confusion about whether their experiences align with their expectations, these women nevertheless seem to relentlessly pursue an embodied understanding of their experiences, willfully persevering in the face of uncertainty. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, I examine the ways in which women make use of stigmatizing discourses in their narrations of their solitary masturbation experiences, and explore the interplay between these negative constructions and more positive embodied sensations. I find that the women in my sample generally consider masturbation to be an aspect of sexuality, and because women’s sexuality more broadly continues to be so socially regulated, even when participants narrate pleasurable embodied sensations, they also apply their understandings of the social negativity surrounding women’s sexuality (for example, constructions of women’s sexuality as dangerous or immoral [Vance, 1989; Vander Spek, 2011]) to their solitary sexual activities, and assume that there must also be something negative about masturbation.

Confusion Arising from a Tension between Embodied Pleasure and Discursive Shame

Many participants narrated a tension between finding their solitary masturbation to be pleasurable in their bodies and also feeling the emotions of shame or guilt about the experience.
These opposing forces often appeared in participants’ narratives side by side as a paradox, and participants frequently narrated confusion as to how to navigate it.

Kristine (White/Serbian, Straight, 32) grew up in Serbia, but went to both public and private high schools in the United States, and tells me that she did not learn about masturbation in any of her school settings (“oh no no no”), nor from her parents (“no no no”). Despite discovering masturbation around the age of twelve through her own embodied exploration (see Chapter Four for more), she says that she later struggled with feelings of shame:

For a long time, it was something that I was really ashamed of. … It was introduced to me as something hidden and wrong and just really unpleasant, so even though like, I would think, “I’m a normal person, and I have, you know, urges or whatever” and I wanted to engage myself with those, with masturbation or sex or whatever, I would still have this tension of, um, involving with it, without feeling guilty.

Kristine identifies a “tension” between her sexual desires (“I have, you know, urges”) and her feelings of guilt and shame (“I was really ashamed;” “feeling guilty”). Though she does not clarify how she learned that masturbation could be considered something “hidden and wrong and just really unpleasant,” Kristine narrates an internal conflict in which she seems fully aware of her sexual desire (“I wanted to engage myself with those [urges]”), and even deems such desire “normal,” but nevertheless finds it difficult to masturbate “without feeling guilty.”

Some women were more concrete about how they learned about the social stigmatization of women’s solitary masturbation, as well as the feelings of confusion that followed. Ashley2 (Afro Caribbean, Straight, 25), who began masturbating at the age of seven or eight, was raised in a Christian Caribbean family, and was very dedicated to her church growing up. She had learned from her culture and religion that all expressions of sexuality outside of marriage were
frowned upon. She explains this to me by saying, “I guess, Christian, Caribbean, backgrounds like, they are against anything like sexual. Just like, they’re prudes!” So when Ashley2 had questions about whether masturbation was considered sinful, as other expressions of sexuality were, she had a difficult time finding anyone to talk to. A close friend who was 5-10 years older was not as helpful as she had hoped:

I remember like, I would ask [about masturbation], and she would get so upset, I’m like “Yo, like, I don’t understand like, is it something that I’m not supposed to be doing? Is it something that I should be doing? Like I’m really just asking cause I’m like really lost here.” And she didn’t really give me an answer … It was just confusing to me because it’s like, now I’m older, much older, and I look back on like my younger self, and I’m like, damn I was really confused because, uh, it feels good by nature, but everyone around you in your environment tells you what you’re doing is wrong. … I remember at one point I was really praying, praying, praying to like, “Help God, like, you know, take away this feeling of wanting to do this to myself” because it was considered a sin. … Like, I felt so bad. Like, I felt so- I felt bad because like, I kept doing it for a while so, “Okay this is [struggle noises].”

Similar to Kristine, Ashley2 narrates an internal tension between embodied pleasure (“it feels good”) and a concern that her masturbation is inappropriate or shameful (“it was considered a sin,” “I felt so bad”), which results in confusion (“I’m like really lost here,” “I was really confused”). Though she reached out to a friend for information and clarity, her friend “didn’t really give [her] an answer,” and “would get so upset” by even being asked. The silence that resonated from this peer was accompanied by messages from others in her social world (“everyone around you”), who made clear to her that masturbation was “wrong” and “a sin.”
Though these cultural mandates from “everyone around” her to restrain her sexuality seem to stem partially from Christian values regarding women’s sexual purity, perhaps they also represent a response to the stereotypes of Black women as sexually insatiable and out of control (Collins, 2000, 2005; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). That is, since Black women in the United States are constructed as hypersexual Jezebels, perhaps “everyone around” Ashley2 advises her to regulate her sexual desires partially to avoid fulfilling the stereotype (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002).

Ashley2’s confusion is palpable and multiple. She first sounds puzzled as to what her community’s standards for solitary masturbation even are, and then struggles to reconcile those standards with her embodied feelings. Since masturbation “feels good by nature,” but her Caribbean and Christian community insists that it is “wrong,” she wonders, “Is it something that I’m not supposed to be doing? Is it something I should be doing?” and is left feeling “really lost.” She tries “praying, praying, praying” for God to “take away this feeling of wanting to do this to [her]self,” but the attempt to contain her sexual desire proves too difficult, and in the end she continues “doing it for awhile,” which makes her feel “so bad.”

Though she feels guilty and confused, Ashley2 demonstrates both an embodied and a discursive knowledge in this narrative as well as a creeping uncertainty about how to reconcile them. She is unequivocal in her knowledge about the pleasure she feels in her body – embodied knowledge (Grosz, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1962) – and her knowledge about the moral imperatives (it “is wrong”) she is being expected to accept – discursive knowledge (Foucault, 1977, 1978). But because these two sources of information are at odds with one another, she feels utterly unsure about what to do.
Jane (Black, Heterosexual, 31) narrates a similar tension between embodied pleasure and shame. Unlike Ashley2, Jane was not raised “religious in any way,” and remembers learning about masturbation mostly from friends, which she describes as “the blind leading the blind.” Jane’s stories about her earliest experiences masturbating around the age of ten or twelve are filled with embodied pleasure and exploration (e.g., “touching and then realizing some of these touches were feeling good”), and like Ashley2, she tells me that during this time, she had a lot of questions, but no one to ask:

J: You know, I wish I didn’t feel ashamed about it, but um, yeah. I wish I, you know, could have talked with someone about it. I think that would have been nice.

C: So, at the time, you think you felt a little bit ashamed?

J: Yes and no. I, I knew I liked it, I knew it felt good, but I also knew that I wasn’t supposed to talk about it, so then I think that was just a conflicting emotion, then why can’t we talk about it?

Jane narrates a mixture of embodied pleasure (“it felt good”) and shame (“I wish I didn’t feel ashamed”) during her early masturbation experiences, and like Ashley2, yearned for someone to talk to (“I wish I … could have talked with someone about it”). When I ask her to clarify whether she had felt ashamed at the time, she responds “yes and no,” and elaborates this response by explaining that on the one hand, she “knew [she] liked it” and “knew it felt good,” but on the other hand, she “knew that [she] wasn’t supposed to talk about it.” Jane’s “conflicting emotion[s]” about her masturbation seemed to not just be about wishing that she had someone to answer her questions, as was the case for Ashley2, but were also about her knowledge that she herself should not speak about it. She sums up her feelings of confusion in her last statement, which is actually a question – “why?”
What these three narratives and the many others like them share is participants’ awareness of several contradictory knowledges. Kristine knows that she desires sexual stimulation, and Ashley2 and Jane know that their solitary masturbation feels pleasurable in their bodies, but these embodied knowledges run counter to the discursive knowledge these women also readily narrate – that masturbation is somehow “bad” or shameful (Rubin, 1984; Weeks, 2012). The notion that masturbation is “bad” may also be intensified for Ashley2 and Jane, two Black women, for whom society’s stereotypes about Black women’s promiscuity can weigh heavy on the mind (Collins, 2000, 2005; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). For decades, researchers have documented women’s feelings of guilt and shame surrounding their masturbation (e.g., Arafat & Cotton, 1974; Bowman, 2014; Laumann et al., 1994), women’s feelings of pleasure from masturbating (e.g., Fahs & Frank, 2014; Hite, 1976; Laumann et al., 1994), and more recently, the tension between them (Fahs & Frank, 2014; Kaestle & Allen, 2011). Some of the women in my sample relate their shame or guilt to specific cultures and/or religions (as Ashley2 does), but this is certainly not universal (more on this below). Alongside these already conflicting knowledges, participants are keenly aware of the deafening silence of those around them regarding masturbation, and they understand that they are also expected to keep their thoughts and questions to themselves (see also Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013). So when the tension arises, as it did for so many participants in my sample, that a woman is experiencing pleasure or desire in her body but shame in her mind, she often finds she has no where to go and no one to talk to, because silence – and silencing – are the social norms.

The confusion and uncertainty that appears to be a direct result of this tumultuous stew of competing knowledges leaves these women with ever more questions: Should I? Should I not?
Why? Despite the scientific and medical consensus that masturbation is physically safe (Herbenick et al., 2009) – even healthy (e.g., Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005) – and widely practiced (e.g., Herbenick et al., 2010) and enjoyed (e.g., Phillippsohn & Hartmann, 2009), the women in my sample, as they look back on their girlhood and/or earlier masturbation experiences, seem unaware of these scientific discourses. Their lack of knowledge of these discourses alongside their knowledge of other discourses (e.g., the stigma associated with masturbation) may keep them from talking to one another (Ashley2) and from asking adults for more information (Jane). Ashley2’s experience of being shut down when she asked for guidance is an example of an active production of ignorance – since women’s solitary masturbation is culturally taboo and generally understood to be something that is not talked about, knowledge-seeking is stopped in its tracks and ignorance is maintained. This ignorance in turn may work to maintain social power structures that regulate women’s sexuality (Tuana, 2004). Because women’s solitary masturbation – and the embodied pleasure that accompanies it – is in excess of the traditional aims of women’s sexuality (i.e., reproduction and male sexual pleasure; Rich, 1980), it represents a threat to the institution of heterosexuality. Constructing women’s solitary masturbation as something stigmatized and unspeakable mitigates this threat, and maintains the institution.

Confusion Arising from Masturbation Experiences Not Being What Women Expected

The confusion women in my sample narrated was not confined to questions about whether masturbation is appropriate and/or why it is so infrequently discussed. One of the most common threads I detected in these women’s narratives was that, particularly during their earliest masturbation efforts, what they actually experienced did not align with what they had expected,
and this felt confusing. Though I didn’t specifically ask participants about what they expected when they first started masturbating, a few women told me about it anyway. In general, women seemed to expect masturbation to be quick, easy, and orgasmic. For example, Michele (White, Queer/Bisexual, 27), who remembers masturbating in early elementary school and described these experiences in decidedly non-sexual terms (see Chapter Four for more on this), took a long break between her childhood masturbation and her high school masturbation (“I just like forgot about it”). When she began masturbating again around the age of seventeen, she explains that the experience was much more tied to sex and sexuality for her:

M: I remember thinking, like, “This is great. I like this.” Um, [3 second pause] like, for, for a while being frustrated that, that I, like, didn’t know how to have an orgasm, even when I was masturbating. Like, it took a while for that to, for that to kick in. Um, so, like, I was a little bit frustrated. Um, [4 second pause] actually, I was pretty frustrated, [laugh] because I thought it would be, like, Boom! Everything would be good.

C: Why did you think it would be?

M: I don’t know. I mean, I I think because, like, I just, I just assumed that, like, sex equals orgasms. Like, whether that was like, sex, any kind of sex or masturbation or what. I just like, I guess I just assumed, like, this just always happens.

Though Michele begins by telling me about how enjoyable the experience was for her (“This is great. I like this”), she very quickly shifts to discussing how “frustrated” she felt that she “didn’t know how to have an orgasm.” She explains her feelings of frustration – at first she says she “was a little bit frustrated,” but then clarifies that she was “actually … pretty frustrated” – in terms of what she had “thought it [the experience] would be.” Because she considers masturbation a “kind of sex,” and she “assumed that … sex equals orgasms,” Michele expresses
the expectation that orgasms would “just always happen” when she masturbated (“Boom! Everything would be good”). Michele’s assumption may reflect the common media constructions of women’s orgasms as quick and easy during heterosexual encounters (Tyler, 2004).

Amelia (Black/African American, Straight, 26) narrates a similar expectation. She tells me that in her middle school sex education class, her teacher taught the class that masturbation was “more geared toward boys” and “something that boys do,” but as an afterthought, the teacher added, “women do it, too.” During her freshman year in college, Amelia had a conversation with her roommates in which “each of us admit[ted] that we never masturbated.” Later that night, she decided to give it a try. The experience, she says, was not what she expected:

In movies it was always just like, oh, a woman would like touch herself and like five, five seconds later she would have an orgasm. … I guess in my mind, male masturbation was always, seemed so easy, where it’s just stroking the penis? So, I as-, thought that female masturbation would be sort of the same thing, of like, [4 second pause] just like touch your clitoris a little bit, and it’ll be fine, and that magic will happen. [laugh]

Like, Michele, Amelia says she expected that orgasms during masturbation would be quick and easy, and she connects this explicitly to media representations of women’s masturbation (“in movies it was always just like, oh a woman would like touch herself and like five seconds later she would have an orgasm”). But unlike Michele, Amelia relates her expectations not just to sex or masturbation in general, but particularly to male norms of masturbation and orgasm. Amelia expects that since male masturbation “seem[s] so easy” and is achieved by “just stroking the penis,” her orgasm should “be sort of the same thing” in which she would “just like touch [her] clitoris a little bit” and she will have an orgasm (“that magic will happen”). Perhaps she was
inclined to hold her masturbation experience to male norms in part because of the way masturbation had been presented to her in school – her teacher expressed that masturbation was “more geared toward boys” and “something that boys do.” Michele narrates the common social idea that male orgasm is quick and unproblematic (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Frith, 2013), and her expectations that her orgasm will be similarly quick and easy may also be set up by unrealistic media representations of women’s orgasms (Tyler, 2004).

Though I did not generally ask participants about their specific expectations regarding masturbation, I noticed that much of what I heard in participants’ narratives referenced some sort of expectation they had held for the experience (such as the expectations above). But despite participants’ confusion about whether or not their experiences aligned with their expectations, their narratives were permeated with a willful determination to better understand the sensations they felt in their bodies. I identified three types of confusion that characterized this theme; participants wondered: A) Is this what masturbation is supposed to feel like? B) Am I doing this right? and C) Is something wrong with me?

**Is this what masturbation is supposed to feel like?** Participants frequently described confusion in their early masturbation experiences about whether the sensations they were feeling in their bodies were “correct.” Jessica (Asian, Heterosexual, 27) went to a Catholic middle school and a public high school and tells me she does not recall learning about masturbation in sex education at school (“there was no mention”) or from her parents at home (“nothing from my parents”). She began masturbating in high school because she was “just curious,” and says, I remember doing some stuff, and I remember thinking, like, sometimes, like, I don’t feel anything, and then, other times, like, okay, that feels okay, or like, that feels good. So, I
think it was just more, like, exploring I guess. And, so, it was kind of like, stages of it, but I had heard that it was, like, amazing. So, I guess I wasn’t, I was just confused, I guess. Cause I was like, “I don’t know if that was what it was supposed to be.” … I was just confused. Um, so I, I was just kind of, like, “I’m not sure if this is how it’s supposed to feel, and I don’t really know what to do.”

Jessica says she was “confused” by the sensations she felt in her body because she was “not sure if this is how it’s supposed to feel.” She explains that she compared the information she was gleaning from her embodied exploration (e.g., “that feels okay” and “that feels good”) to her expectation that it would feel “amazing.” When what she felt in her body did not align with her expectations, she felt “confused” about whether her experience was “what it was supposed to be,” and did not “really know what to do” to make it better. Though she narrates embodied knowledge in the moment (i.e., she knew and could name what she felt in her body), she also narrates uncertainty at the time about whether her embodied sensations were what they were “supposed to be.” It is almost as if she does not trust what she feels in her body; she knows what she feels, but it may still be up for debate. She seems to have believed that there is a norm or standard for embodied pleasure during masturbation (it should be “amazing”), and then wondered whether her experience was falling short. Though Jessica found herself unsure whether her sensations were the right ones (“how it’s supposed to feel”), she still willfully listened to what she felt in her body as a means to evaluate this early masturbation experience, and rather than giving up, she describes a process (“stages”) of “exploring” or maybe even practicing, even despite not “know[ing] what to do.”

Similar to Jessica’s narration of explorative embodiment, participants sometimes described their first embodied sensations during masturbation as pleasurable and simultaneously
“strange” or “weird.” Cecilia (Latina, Heterosexual, 27), for instance, says of her first masturbation experience in eighth grade, “I think I just, like, brushed my hand [on my genitals], and it felt good-weird?” Likewise, Tina (Asian, Straight, 28), who started masturbating when she was twelve or thirteen, says, “I did feel weird, like weird and good.” These experiences of masturbation feeling both pleasurable and strange (and/or maybe new and unexpected?) illuminate the exploratory, uncertain, and embodied nature of early masturbation experiences for some women. Perhaps the strangeness Cecilia and Tina narrate feeling is a function of the newness of the behavior – having never experienced these “good” sensations, they feel “weird,” but that weirdness does not seem to take away from their pleasure, which appears to be an equally important aspect of the experience for them. A few participants described this weirdness as “icky” or “messy.” For example, Eleanor (White, Heterosexual, 30), who began masturbating with “nipple play” around the age of eight or nine, graduated to “the clitoral stuff” a few years later. She says of these early experiences of genital masturbation,

Physically, it felt icky, only not in the way that I felt ashamed, but that, like, you know, I was aroused, so, you know, my vagina was lubricating, and all these things, and that was a very, like, strange kind of sensation. And I think, maybe because I had never, uh, like, had played with my clitoris before, that it was, like, super sensitive, so I remember it just being, like, really, like an icky, kind of intense, like, what’s-going-on, kind of feeling.

Yeah, but again, still something that I was, like, this is pretty cool, but I don’t really want to talk about it.

Eleanor narrates a “cool” and “strange” experience in her early masturbation experience that echoes Cecilia’s and Tina’s. She says that she was “aroused,” but that “physically it felt icky” and “strange.” She clarifies that she does not mean that she felt ashamed, but rather that her state
of arousal meant that her “vagina was lubricating,” and that noticing this lubrication was a “strange kind of sensation.” It is unclear whether the sensation she is referring to is the sensation she feels in her genitals or the sensation she feels in her hand as she touches herself. But like Cecilia and Tina, Eleanor’s experience appears to be tied to the newness of it all – having never “played with [her] clitoris before,” she noticed that it felt “super sensitive” to touch, and she describes that sensation as “an icky, kind of intense, like, what’s-going-on, kind of feeling.” Despite feeling confused (“what’s-going-on”) and “strange” about the “intense” and “icky” sensations she noticed in her body (and also not “really want[ing] to talk about it” like Jane, above), Eleanor is quick to note that she “still” thought the experience was “pretty cool.” This suggests that even in the face of uncertainty regarding her embodied sensations (and a reluctance to “talk about it”), she still found the experience intriguing.

Perhaps Eleanor’s experience of ickiness when she touched herself reflects the social idea that women’s genitals are somehow unclean or disgusting (Hite, 1976; Reinholtz & Muehlenhard, 1995; Rubin, 1984). Bodily fluids like women’s vaginal lubrication have also been theorized as “borderline states,” which, due to their inability to be contained, are considered dangerous and contaminating (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Grosz, 1994; McClelland & Fine, 2008a). This notion of dangerous fluidity is particularly attached to women and the feminine; feminist writers Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have suggested that whereas solid states represent rationality and masculinity (even male sexual arousal is solidified as an erection), fluids and viscosity represent instability, femininity, excess, and danger (Irigaray, 1985; Kristeva, 1982). For Eleanor, the feeling of lubrication alongside a “super sensitive” and “arous[ing]” bodily sensation felt “icky” and “strange,” reflecting these broader social understandings of women’s bodily fluids as unnerving, unbounded, and threatening.
Nevertheless, Eleanor’s narration, like Jessica’s maintains a tone of curiosity and embodied interest. She could have felt an “icky” sensation and stopped immediately, disgusted with her bodily fluids, but this is not what she tells me; instead, she describes the experience as “intense” and “pretty cool,” and inquisitively wonders exactly what is happening to her (“what’s-going-on”), suggesting that despite the discourse that women’s genitals are disgusting or “borderline,” Eleanor does not suspend her bodily exploration and determinedly, willfully, forges ahead (Ahmed, 2014).

**Am I doing this right?** Similar to concerns about whether the sensations women experienced in their bodies felt how they were “supposed to” feel, some participants wondered whether they were masturbating in the “right” way. Free@30’s (Black, No Label, 34) mother “brought [her] up in church” and she tells me that the pastor would preach, “Masturbation was bad. God doesn’t like it.” After getting married in her early twenties and having two children, Free@30 realized that she was not having orgasms during sex (“This isn’t fair. And I have two children, and I’ve never had an orgasm”). At the age of twenty-nine, she decided to try masturbating for the first time, and says,

> I remember after trying to do it, I’m feeling, like, confused. Because, like, this feels like I have to pee. [giggle] This feels like I’m doing something wrong. I might just be peeing on myself. Um, it’s, it was difficult for me to relax and actually enjoy it. I was, like, “Why do people do this?” [giggle] And then I was, like, “Okay, I’m doing something wrong.”

Like Jessica and Eleanor, Free@30 narrates confusion (“I’m feeling … confused;” “why do people do this?”), which is tied to her embodied sensations (“this feels like I have to pee”).
Feeling like she “[has] to pee” does not seem to be the sensation she was expecting, because she immediately says, “this feels like I’m doing something wrong,” and then again says, “I might just be peeing on myself.” Because of her embodied confusion, she found it “difficult” to “relax and actually enjoy” her experience, leading her to wonder, “why do people do this?” Caught in a cycle of wanting to masturbate specifically because she wants to have orgasms, but feeling confused about her embodied experience, Free@30 concludes, “Okay, I’m doing something wrong.”

The notion that Free@30 is “doing something wrong” implies that she believes there is a “right” way to masturbate, and that she is failing to live up to that standard – and she is not alone. One participant, Kristine (White/Serbian, Straight, 32), used our interview as an opportunity to ask whether her preferred method of masturbation (rubbing herself on her bed or a pillow without using her hands) was “weird.” After I assured her that her method is “very common” (Carvalheira & Leal, 2013; Hite, 1976; Leff & Israel, 1983), she asked again, “so, so it’s not weird or anything?” And I reassured her, “No.”

Free@30 and Kristine’s concerns with how to masturbate properly reflect the idea that girls and women are expected to be proficient and skilled in all they attempt – they are expected to be high-achievers (Burns, Futch & Tolman, 2011). In a narrative study of adolescent girls’ experiences of fellatio, Burns and colleagues (2011) found that girls were commonly concerned that they did not “know what to do” or they worried that they would be “bad” at the behavior. This phenomenon of surveillance of one’s own sexual skill during sexual activities has also been called spectatoring, and has been theorized to detract from sexual satisfaction (Barlow, 1986; Masters and Johnson, 1970). Such concerns reflect an achievement discourse, parallel to that of academic achievement (see also Fine & McClelland, 2006), in which girls and women are
expected to work toward proficiency in order to avoid the consequences of failure (Cacchioni, 2007; Tyler, 2004). Unlike the interpersonal nature of fellatio experiences though, women are physically alone during solitary masturbation. Perhaps the experiences narrated by Free@30 and Kristine suggest that even when women have no other party to concern themselves with, they still surveil their own sexual skill.

Some participants narrated this concern with masturbating in the “right” or “wrong” way in terms of penetrative masturbation. Amelia (Black/African American, Straight, 26), who, above, narrated confusion that masturbatory orgasms were not as quick and easy as she expected, tells me about another aspect of her first masturbation experience:

I just started touching myself. I was sort of, like, okay, like, like, rubbing feels pretty good. And I think I kept, I think I tried for, tried like, to, insert my fingers, like, way too soon. And I was, like, that hurt [giggle] like, that doesn’t feel good at all. Um, so I stopped after that. And then I was, just sort of, like, “maybe it’s just not for me.”

Like Jessica and Free@30, Amelia narrates using her embodied sensations to guide her exploration, and says she felt discouraged (“I stopped after that” and “maybe it’s just not for me”) when her sensations did not meet her expectations. But Amelia’s narrative also reveals a heteronormative focus on penetration. Though she started her exploration by “rubbing,” which felt “pretty good,” she “tried, like, to insert [her] fingers, like, way too soon,” which “hurt” and “[didn’t] feel good at all.” These unpleasant embodied sensations led her to “stop” masturbating for a long time (in the interview she says that after one more experience that “didn’t really go any better,” she didn’t masturbate for several years).

Amelia’s narrative suggests that she imagined that the “right” way to masturbate was by trying to recreate a (hetero)sexual intercourse type of experience. Fahs & Frank (2014)
documented the presumed importance of penetration in women’s solitary masturbation in their interviews as well. They found that though most women reported preferring to masturbate by stimulating their clitorises, some women worried that this practice was unusual, because they presumed that most women masturbate by penetrating themselves. Surprisingly, though Fahs & Frank found this phenomenon to be more common among heterosexual women, I did not find that pattern in my sample; sexual minority women and heterosexual women narrated this penetrative focus in similar frequencies. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that in Fahs & Frank’s study, women were reflecting on their current masturbation practices, whereas in mine, women were looking back at earlier experiences. Nevertheless, it seems that for some women, concerns about masturbating in the “right” way incorporate a presumption about the importance of penetration.

The experiences presented in this section bring to light another tension within women’s solitary masturbation experiences. Alongside the tension between pleasure and shame, these women also narrate a tension between pleasure and wanting to masturbate “correctly.” While women’s assumptions that there must be a “right” way to masturbate (or their fears that they are masturbating in the “wrong” way) reflect discourses of hard work, achievement, and personal responsibility (Burns, Futch & Tolman, 2011; Cacchioni, 2007; Frith, 2013; Tyler, 2004), in practice, certain methods of masturbating generally are more pleasurable, or at least more orgasmic, for most women – namely clitoral stimulation. Research has consistently shown that only about 25% of women consistently orgasm from (hetero)sexual intercourse alone (Lloyd, 2005), and that most women prefer to masturbate by stimulating their clitorises (Davis, Blank, Lin, & Bonillas, 1996; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Leff & Israel, 1983). A focus on penetration, then, not only reflects the imperative to masturbate in the “right” way (which here means the way that
is most closely associated with the traditional functions of women’s sexuality), but also the (hetero)sexist notion that women should be sexually satisfied from penetration alone (Fahs & McClelland, 2016).

Amelia’s (and other participants’) assumption that masturbation should involve penetration also illuminates a possible interpersonal aspect of her experience. There is a ghost of an imagined other lingering between the lines of these narratives, and it appears again and again (as I examine below). Did Amelia rush to penetrate herself (even though the “rubbing [felt] pretty good” already) because she imagined herself with a sexual partner at the time? Did Kristine doubt the normalcy of her preferred masturbation method because it lacked the penetrative focus typical of heterosexual intercourse? In any case, as these and other participants’ narratives suggest (more on this below), relational expectations may be at play in these women’s physically solitary masturbation experiences.

Participants’ uncertainty about what to expect (and whether their experiences lived up to these expectations) seemed to leave them feeling confused (Free@30), doubtful (Kristine), and discouraged (Amelia). But these narratives are complex and not at all straightforward. While participants struggle to navigate interpersonal and societal norms, their attempts to understand their experiences and their confusion as to the “right” way to masturbate also sound very embodied and agentic. Free@30’s description of her arousal as feeling like she had “to pee” was an honest description of a new sensation, and her conclusion that she must have been “doing something wrong” seemed to be tied to this exploratory and embodied experience itself, and not only to social mandates about the “right” way to masturbate. Kristine’s concern that her favorite method of masturbating might be “weird” did not stop her from masturbating that way – she still found it pleasurable, despite her doubts. And even Amelia’s impulse to masturbate with
penetration was strongly informed by her embodied reaction – once she realized “it hurt,” she listened to her body, and “stopped.” Although there may be a tension between what women feel in their bodies and their desire to masturbate the “right” way, in these narratives, women seem able and determined to use their embodiment as a tool to help them decide what masturbating “correctly” means.

Is something wrong with me? Alongside concerns that the sensations participants were feeling in their bodies were not the “right” ones, or that the methods that participants tried or preferred were the “wrong” ones, some participants worried that in light of their unmet expectations, something might be wrong with them. For example, when Michele (White, Queer/Bisexual, 27) started masturbating again around the age of seventeen with the hopes of having orgasms (see above), she asked herself, “What’s wrong with me? Like, why isn’t this [orgasm] happening?” Rachel (Chinese/White, Queer, 32) narrated a similar experience. The daughter of two psychologists, Rachel tells me her parents were very open with her as a child in terms of talking about sex, but that they never mentioned masturbation (“I don’t remember ever hearing about masturbation from them”). Rachel had heard in her high school sex education class that masturbation was “normal,” but that the lesson was “definitely nothing that [she] associated with [her]self or, you know, women.” In college, she realized that she was not having orgasms during sex with her boyfriend, and so together they shopped for a vibrator for her – an experience she describes as “nice” and “supportive.” When it came time for her to “try using it on [her] own,” she felt “excited,” but the experience fell short of her expectations. She says,

It just wasn’t making me feel the way I hoped it would, and I gave up after a while, and I was definitely frustrated and disappointed. And that’s kind of why I started to think, like,
is it something about my body? Um, or is it, like, not the right kind of toy? I just didn’t, like something wasn’t working, and I wasn’t totally sure if it was, like, my fault or something else.

Like Free@30 and Michele, Rachel was motivated to masturbate specifically because she wanted to have orgasms. She says that her new vibrator “wasn’t making [her] feel the way [she] hoped it would,” suggesting that, similar to Jessica, she had an expectation for how the vibrator would make her feel in her body, but that the actual sensations she experienced fell short. These unmet expectations left her feeling “frustrated and disappointed.” Because of this disappointment (“that’s kind of why”), she “started to think” about whether there was “something about [her] body” that could explain why “something wasn’t working.” In addition to wondering whether there was “something about her body” that kept her from experiencing the orgasms she desired, Rachel also wondered whether she was using “the right toy,” echoing the participants above, who narrated concerns that they were not masturbating the “right” way. In the end, she seems confused (“I wasn’t totally sure”) about the source of her frustration (though she is sure that “something wasn’t working”), decides not to try anymore (“I gave up after a while”), and wonders whether “it was, like, my fault or something else.”

While the participants above wondered whether their embodied sensations and masturbation methods were the “right” ones, Rachel took this uncertainty even further, wondering whether she herself and her body were flawed. She believed there might be “something about [her] body” that could explain her lackluster experience, suggesting that she feared her body was defective in some way. Panics about women’s sexual dysfunction have been a part of public discourse since before Rachel would have begun masturbating (Tiefer, 2006), and so perhaps her concerns about her body not “working” are related to this general social
anxiety. Alternatively, perhaps Rachel was particularly keen to evaluate her sexual response given that both she and her boyfriend were invested in her orgasms; here, again, I notice the interpersonal nature of this physically solitary experience. But Rachel is not only concerned about her body’s capabilities; she also worries that her inability to have an orgasm is her “fault,” reflecting a moralizing perspective, and perhaps even a sense of responsibility (to herself? to her partner?) to orgasm. Like the participants presented above, Rachel seems to see her lack of an orgasm as a personal shortcoming, reflecting both the relational nature of this solitary sexual experience, and the broader mandates of perpetual improvement and personal responsibility (Cacchioni, 2007; Frith, 2013; Tyler, 2004). But also echoing those above, Rachel makes use of the sensations she feels in her body to guide her, grounding her assessment of her experience in how it “feel[s].”

**Masturbation is an Aspect of Sexuality, So There Must be Something Negative About It**

In addition to the various forms of confusion participants narrated, I also found that women made use of discourses about women’s sexuality more broadly in their narratives about solitary masturbation – perhaps in an attempt to resolve their uncertainty. That is, a consistent thread throughout the interviews was that since women thought of their masturbation experiences as an expression of their sexuality and as a type of sex, and since women’s sexuality is constructed in our (hetero)sexist society as a dangerous liability (McClelland & Fine, 2008a; Vance, 1989), participants wondered whether solitary masturbation was also somehow bad. I identified four ways in which participants seemed to cognitively link solitary masturbation to broader social norms and discourses regulating women’s sexuality to conclude that there must be something negative about the behavior: A) Masturbation is immoral; B) Women who masturbate
are on the verge of being out of control or excessive; C) Masturbation must have major consequences; and D) Masturbation could affect current or future sexual partners.

**Masturbation is immoral.** Many participants talked about receiving the message that women’s sexuality and sexual intercourse in particular were morally wrong. Connecting this moral imperative to masturbation, some participants explained how the negativity surrounding women’s sexuality in general created a context in which they also viewed masturbation as immoral. Eve (White, Straight, 24), who began masturbating when she was “really little,” did not grow up in a very religious family, but did attend Sunday School at her church. Though her parents did not talk to her about masturbation, she “feel[s] like” her teachers at school must have mentioned that masturbation was normal during their lessons on puberty, but she says she does not “have any clear memory of it.” Instead, Eve tells me she talked about masturbation with a friend in middle school, and they learned that “we both did it and we both liked it.” However, when Eve’s friend tried to be open about masturbation with the rest of their social group, the other girls “definitely shamed” her. Eve explains that she thinks our society in general sends similar messages to women and girls about masturbation:

> I think, in general, it’s um, you know, like a very vague kind of shame, just like, wrapped up in sexuality, in general. Um, I think it’s just, like, not talked about, not even to the point of saying it’s bad. It’s just like, an immense silence around it, and then, if you’re in an environment where you’re being taught sexuality or pre-marital sex or, or just being sexual, or being too sexual, any of that, of course, it’s going, you, you can, you know, easily apply it to masturbation without being told that you should. Um, and I think just all the reactions to, you know, more like when it’s, not so much that people are outright
saying this is bad and wrong, but whenever it is brought up, I think that it’s looked down
on a lot, or um, you know, nobody wants to talk about it.

Eve identifies a moral code of women’s sexuality in general that defines nearly all forms of
sexual expression – including masturbation – as shameful and bad (Rubin, 1984; Weeks, 2012).
Though she seems to be describing this idea as one she has encountered rather than narrating that
she subscribes to it, she echoes participants presented above in connecting the “vague kind of
shame” she senses in society about women’s sexuality more broadly (“wrapped up in sexuality,
in general”) to the “immense silence around” masturbation in particular, stressing that
masturbation is “not talked about” because “nobody wants to.” She says that even though people
may not be “outright saying this is bad and wrong,” because so many aspects of sexuality are
constructed as shameful (for example, “sexuality, or pre-marital sex or, or just being sexual, or
being too sexual, any of that”), women could “easily apply it to masturbation without being told
that you should.” Eve says that women are thus left with an understanding that masturbation is
“looked down on a lot,” suggesting a moral judgment.

Though Eve does not reference religion, some participants expressed concern that
masturbation was immoral based on the messages they had received through their religious
upbringings. For instance Amy Today (African American, Lesbian, 41), who was raised by her
“super-duper religious” grandmother, grew up going to church three times a week, “and Sundays
we would stay all day long.” She says she received the message that “Self sex, sex with other
people, all, any kind of sex is bad.” Amy Today, like Eve, received messages growing up that
since masturbation is a “kind of sex” (i.e., “self sex”), it is morally judged as “bad,” though
neither of these women narrates subscribing to that belief themselves.
Ashley2 (Afro Caribbean, Straight, 25), who, as I described above, was also raised in a Christian household, was even more specific about the messages she received about masturbation from her church:

Masturbation is the devil’s work, you’re not supposed to be touching yourself like that. Um, it’s um, you’re pleasing yourself, you’re not supposed to be pleasing yourself, you’re not supposed to um, be touching your body parts like that, that that’s that’s against God, you’re um, you’re lusting, that was it like a lot of it is like, you’re lusting after yourself. That’s what, yeah. That was one of the things I do remember. [yawn] Excuse me, sorry, is like, yeah you’re lusting after yourself and you’re not supposed to be lusting after yourself, you’re not supposed to be lusting after anyone and stuff.

Like Eve and Amy Today, Ashley2 narrates an understanding of the social message that since masturbation is sexual, it is morally suspect; building on this notion, Ashley2’s narrative also illuminates possible reasons why. She begins by explaining that her church taught her that touching one’s own body parts to give oneself pleasure (“touching yourself like that”) is “against God” and is “the devil’s work” – clear statements of moral judgment. After narrating these basic moral parameters, she seems to suddenly remember (“that was it”) why masturbation was so disparaged – it represented a form of “lust.” She clarifies that “lusting after yourself” (which “you’re not supposed to be” doing), is disapproved of in part because “lusting” in general is objectionable (“you’re not supposed to be lusting after anyone”). But alongside this sense that women’s sexuality in general is immoral or shameful, which seems to be the case in terms of general social morality and in terms of religious morality, Ashley2’s narrative provides hints that this moral imperative may be related to pleasure or gratification more generally – “you’re not supposed to be pleasing yourself.”
As I detailed in the Introduction, *lust* is a concept that is similar to sexual desire (and is often considered a synonym thereof [Levine, 2003]), but that has a particular meaning in Christianity. Though Christians are taught to consider sexual desire, arousal, and pleasure biologically natural, they are expected to confine these experiences to their marital relationships, and even thinking sexual thoughts – what Jesus called “adultery in the heart” (Matthew 5:28 New International Version) – is considered lustful and sinful (Vander Spek, 2011). In the context of these moral mandates, the logic that Ashley2 describes becomes clearer. Because lust includes not just interpersonal behaviors, but also solitary behaviors and thoughts, Ashley2’s understanding of how her solitary masturbation would be viewed by her community (as “the devil’s work”) is shrewd. Masturbation is sinful because it is a form of lust, and lust is sinful because it is a form of extramarital sexual pleasure.

Some participants who were raised in religious environments did not recall receiving any explicit messages about masturbation from their religion, but instead connected masturbation to the negative messages they were receiving about sex in general, and thereby assumed that masturbation must also be morally wrong. Raisin (Filipino American, Lesbian, 30), who was raised in a Christian household in which her family attended church “three times a week,” tells me that she did not learn about masturbation from her parents (“no”), school (“nothing”), or church (“never”), but instead, “just did it” when she was in first grade. Though she did not receive explicit messages about masturbation from her church, by the time she was “thirteen? fourteen?” she had begun to assume that it must be immoral:

[Masturbation] must be something, it’s sexually based, so, like, it must be something God doesn’t like. You know? Especially if you’re getting messages like sex is bad, and you should only have sex after marriage, or something.
Like Eve, Amy Today, and Ashley2, Raisin narrates the notion that since masturbation is “sexually based,” “it must be something God doesn’t like.” But unlike the religious messages Amy Today and Ashley2 describe, the messaging Raisin received was broader. She knew that “sex is bad” and that people “should only have sex after marriage,” and so she connected this message to masturbation, deciding it “must be” “bad” too. Though Raisin describes religious messages she received, her narrative sounds more like Eve’s than Amy Today’s and Ashley2’s. Because no adults explicitly discussed masturbation with either woman when they were children, Eve and Raisin instead draw on what they know about the acceptability of other sexual behaviors to make assumptions about solitary masturbation (Eve: “you can … easily apply it [the messages] to masturbation,” Raisin: “it’s sexually based, so … it must be something God doesn’t like”). However, unlike Eve, Amy Today, and Ashley2, Raisin sounds as if she may have subscribed to this idea herself, though her narrative does not make this explicit.

Some women, however, were unequivocal in their narrations of having believed that masturbation was immoral. Participants who narrated religious and moral messages often explained that the messages were directly tied to feelings of guilt or shame. Liz (Puerto Rican, Queer, 30), who teaches sex education as an adult, tells me that she did not receive any information about masturbation from her parents (“It wasn’t something that was, like, discussed”) or schools growing up (“mmm, I don’t think so”), but that her Catholic upbringing informed how she felt about her masturbation experiences. She says,

At some point, I must have gotten the message that, like, masturbation isn’t um, is, is, like, sinful. Um, so I remember, like, hitting puberty, like hitting, [clears throat], maybe eleven or twelve, and, like, actually masturbating, and then feeling really guilty about it afterwards. Um, and then wondering if, and then like feeling, like, um, “Okay, okay, I’ll
stop.” [giggle] and then, like, not stopping, [laugh] and then feeling, like, even more guilty afterwards. … I’d be, like, “I’m gonna stop. I promise.” Um, especially when the thought of, like, you’ve prayed for something, you might say, like, asked for something, like, “Listen. If you give me this, [giggle] I’m going to stop masturbating.” [giggle] And then, [giggle] you know. The, like, I guess, the feelings were attached to that.

Though Liz cannot remember precisely how she “got the message,” at some point she came to believe that masturbation was “sinful.” This belief led to a cycle of shame (similar to Ashley2’s above) in which she would masturbate, then “feel really guilty about it afterwards,” then reluctantly (“okay, okay”) “promise” God that she would “stop” or bargain with God about stopping (“Listen. If you give me this, I’m going to stop masturbating.”). But then, she would not actually stop, which led her to feel “even more guilty afterwards” (“the feelings were attached to that”). Perhaps the cultural expectations of many Catholic Latino/a communities that a woman’s honor and worth is tied to her chastity play a role here (Espín, 1984; Zavella, 2003). Olivia Espín (1984) notes that abstaining from sexual pleasure of any sort is often considered part of maintaining purity in Catholic Latino/a communities (reminiscent of Ashley2’s discussions of Christian lust above), and so perhaps Liz’s guilt stems from experiencing sexual pleasure in this context. She implies that masturbation was pleasurable to her in this narrative without saying it outright; she says that though she promised God that she would stop masturbating and felt “really guilty” about it, she still did not stop. This suggests that there was a willful force at play that made masturbation appealing to her despite the messages of “sin” and the feelings of guilt she experienced.

Liz also invokes an interpersonal dynamic, but in this experience, that relational dimension is not with an imagined sexual partner, but with God. Before even mentioning praying
to God, Liz appears to have an internal conversation with some imagined other, in which she says to no one she has yet identified, “okay, okay, I’ll stop.” Is she talking to herself? Perhaps she is self-regulating, and since she is aware that masturbation is “sinful,” she is telling herself she should not be doing it, and responding to herself as well. Or is she talking to God? Though she has not yet mentioned prayer, perhaps she is responding to the “message” she imagines or feels that God would be sending her. In any case, some sort of internal-yet-relational phenomenon seems to be at play for Liz in this experience.

Together, these narratives illuminate one way that pleasure and guilt can exist side by side – in a context in which masturbation is “bad” or “sinful” or “looked down on,” experiencing or seeking it out for the purpose of pleasure can create feelings of shame – or at least feelings of doubt. Some of these women seem to narrate an understanding that according to society, they should feel ashamed, but these women do not always narrate shame themselves. Sometimes the moral restrictions on self-pleasure were explicit and sometimes they were implied (i.e., by being related to sex, masturbation was presumed to be governed by similar moral norms), but in any case, these restrictions led some participants to believe that masturbation was not to be talked about and was shameful or otherwise negative. Constructing women’s autonomous pleasure-seeking behaviors as morally unacceptable contributes to the maintenance of oppressive institutions, because women’s embodied knowledge and pleasure are devalued and even discouraged.

**Women who masturbate are on the verge of being out of control or excessive.** While morality and religion were common themes in these women’s narratives, several women also talked about masturbation as something that was always on the verge of being out of control,
addictive, or otherwise excessive. For instance, Amy Today (African American, Lesbian, 41), who above said that she learned in church that “Self sex, sex with other people, all, any kind of sex is bad,” also said, “growing up, it was always put out there like it’s [masturbation is] something bad or, like, you don’t have any control over yourself, or something like that.” Amy Today reiterates learning that masturbation is “bad,” but this time, rather than relating that moral judgment to religion, she explains it in terms of a woman not “hav[ing] any control over [her]self.” Similarly, Ashley2 (Afro Caribbean, Straight, 25) shares her thoughts about the amount of masturbation she thinks is appropriate:

I think the more I got like, into like masturbating, not like I’m a masturbate freak, um, one of them [referring to the Q sort cards] like “should you masturbate on the regular,” I wouldn’t think you need to do that on the regular. I just, oh and there’s a question [referring to the Q sort cards] where it’s just like, oh like “you want to masturbate but you don’t want to masturbate.” Like that, yeah, I think by nature, just how your body’s designed like, you know sex is always on your mind, but, that doesn’t mean you have to like, go in for it like “yeah! I need this right now” like, you know like, you’re a crack fiend. … I don’t know, I think at one point I would say I was addicted to it. Like, [laugh] I was just doing it on the regular, but I had to, that’s just like “alright, I I got to like, stop this,” cause I was just doing it just like entirely too- in my opinion I just felt like I was just doing it entirely too much.

Unlike Amy Today, who narrated an understanding of this social norm, but did not necessarily subscribe to it herself, Ashley2 is very clear that she believes a person should not “need to [masturbate] on the regular,” and expresses concern that she herself may have been “addicted” to masturbating “at one point.” She begins her narrative by talking about getting “more … into like
masturbating,” but then immediately injects a caveat – “not like I’m a masturbate freak” – which seems meant to reassure me that she does not masturbate too much. While she recognizes that sexual desire (“sex is always on your mind”) is natural (“by nature, just how your body’s designed”), she quickly imposes a restriction on unbridled sexuality; just because it is natural, “doesn’t mean” a person should feel urgency about their sexual desire (“I need this right now”) or masturbate regularly (“on the regular”) – such a behavior seems to Ashley2 to be akin to being “addicted” to masturbation, and she compares the “need” to masturbate “right now” to being a “crack fiend.” These beliefs also seem to underlie her concerns that her own masturbation practices had “at one point” gotten out of hand, to the point at which she believed she “was just doing it entirely too much” and “was addicted to it.” Her concerns about addiction led her to modify her masturbation behavior, and she thought to herself, “I got to like, stop this.”

Ashley2’s narrative builds on her discussion of lust (above). While she defies the strict Christian mandates of avoiding lust altogether (she does masturbate), she still draws on the foundational philosophies of Christian lust to explain her belief that “too much” masturbation is problematic. Sexual desire itself is constructed as natural (“just how your body’s designed … sex is always on your mind”), but this natural proclivity turns sour (and presumably, sinful) when pleasure-seeking behaviors become too urgent or too regular – when they become excessive. In this way, the Christian imperatives against lust (including the mandate to avoid sexual pleasure) intermingle with broader social discourses that define women’s sexuality and autonomous pleasure seeking as always on the verge of dangerous excess – as I discussed in the Introduction, they share a historical root. Like Christian lust, current secular understandings of women’s sexuality also regulate pleasure, expecting women to reign it in so as not to be out of control or excessive (McClelland & Fine, 2008a), and again, for both Amy Today and Ashley2, racist
cultural stereotypes construct Black women as particularly out of control and promiscuous (Collins, 2000, 2005; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Ashley2 may have internalized these stigmas about Black women who are too sexual, because she uses disparaging language to distance herself from this excessive stereotype (“freak” and “crack fiend”).

Concerns about being addicted to masturbation were common among participants. Sally (Haitian American [Black], Heterosexual, 33) tells me a story about her first experiences masturbating when she was “maybe fourteen or fifteen” years old and taking a shower. Her family had just installed a new showerhead, and in the process of washing her body, she discovered a genital sensation that felt “nice,” and then “put the pressure down there, and it was like, blow your mind.” I ask her what she thought of the experience afterwards, and she says,

I was, like, “So, tomorrow, same time, same place.” [laugh] I mean, I just thought was this was, like, the best, but at, it’s so funny, the first few months, I was, like, “I’m all about this.” And, then, afterwards, I started to feel bad. I was, like, “Is this too much? Should I be doing this? Should I, am I addicted?” I felt like, could you get addicted to it? I was, like, ‘cause it was happening, maybe once a day. Not-, nothing crazy. … I think it’s the messaging that you get about, like, not being an overly sexual person. It starts to, like, seep in your brain of, like, “Can’t enjoy it too much. Can’t be doing it too much, ‘cause you’re a flower. Don’t want to ruin yourself for someone else.”

Sally narrates a process of embodied pleasure and discovery followed by an agentic desire to recreate it (“So, tomorrow, same time, same place”). But shortly after her exciting discovery, she began to feel “bad,” implying feelings of guilt or shame. As with many participants above, this tension led to confusion for Sally; she asked herself “should I be doing this?” suggesting that she was uncertain whether her experience was acceptable, even though she knew for sure that she
enjoyed it. Similar to Ashley2, she wondered whether her experience was “too much” (it is unclear whether she was thinking about her pleasure or her behavior as being “too much”), and also wondered if she was “addicted to it.” Previous researchers have documented these concerns about addiction as well (Marcus, 2011). Also echoing Ashley2, Sally notes that at the time she was masturbating “maybe once a day,” and then immediately reassures me that her masturbation frequency was “nothing crazy.” This disclaimer reiterates the stigma associated with masturbating “too much” and that a person who does so is not just out of control (a “freak” or “crack fiend,” as Ashley2 said), but is also doing something “crazy.”

Sally goes on to explain why she believes she had concerns about addiction, saying that there is “messaging” that she internalized ("it starts to, like, seep in your brain") that she should not be “an overly sexual person,” which means she should not “enjoy it too much” or “do it too much.” There is ambiguity in these statements and it is unclear whether the “it” she is referring to is sex, sexual behaviors more broadly, or masturbation in particular. Additionally, she does not unequivocally state whether the message she narrates is directed particularly at women, particularly at Black women, or at all people. Considering the cultural stereotypes of Black women as insatiable Jezebels, Sally’s statements, like Ashley2’s could signify an internalization of these assumptions of excess. Her next words help to clarify. To explain her statements about not “enjoy[ing] it” or “doing it” “too much,” Sally says, “’cause you’re a flower.” This suggests that Sally is referring specifically to women (though it is still unclear whether this narration is racialized), because she makes use of the traditional understanding of women as delicate, beautiful and in need of protection. She then connects this notion of women as fragile to the message that women should not be “overly sexual”: “[You] don’t want to ruin yourself for someone else.” Her narration evokes the notion that women’s excessive sexuality is dangerous –
it has the capacity to “ruin” a person (McClelland & Fine, 2008a; Vance, 1989) – and it is not just dangerous for a woman herself, but also could compromise future interpersonal relationships (“ruin yourself for someone else”). This is a sentiment that is a common component of conservative sex education curricula (and particularly AOUM curricula): the notion that women who have sex or participate in other sexual behaviors before marriage become used up and their value erodes in the eyes of their future spouses (Lamb et al., 2011), and Black and Latina women are often constructed as particularly “at-risk” (Garcia, 2012). Many metaphors have been utilized in U.S. sex education courses to make this point, including chewed pieces of gum (Culp-Ressler, 2013), dirty pieces of candy (Semuels, 2014), and, as Sally references, a flower that has “given away” all of its petals and is no longer desirable (Hellerstein, 2015). So like Ashley2, Sally narrates a fear of addiction and sexual excess, but Sally explicitly links her experience to potential consequences for sexual partners and to broader (non-religious) social messages about women’s sexuality (more on consequences and partner-related solitary masturbation experiences below).

In addition to proscriptions against women’s excessive enjoyment of sexual pleasure, and concerns about addiction or ruining oneself for a partner, some women identified the common belief that if young people experience sexual pleasure, they will be unable to stop themselves from having sexual intercourse. Ellie (White, Heterosexual, 30), who says she “missed sex ed somehow,” masturbated as a young child (“young enough that I had a teddy bear … five or six”) and as a teenager, but did not “really … start masturbating very much until I was, like, in my twenties and single.” When I ask her about the messages in our society for girls and women about masturbation, she says,
I feel like girls and, like, pre-teens and teens, it’s um, like, the message is like, “don’t do this.” You-, like, and I guess it’s the same about sex, but you know, just like, uh, making girls feel shame, or, or guilt about, like exploring their bodies and um, and like, it’s a dangerous thing to do, because it’s like, the gateway drug to sex, and pregnancy, and, you know, all those terrible things. [giggle]

Ellie explains that for girls and young women, mandates such as “don’t do this” govern many sexual behaviors, including masturbation (“I guess it’s the same about sex”). However, like Amy Today, Ellie describes the parameters of this social norm, but does not appear to necessarily believe it herself. Whereas Sally hinted at the potential for masturbation to have consequences for her (it could “ruin [her] for someone else”), Ellie narrates the logic of this fear of women’s sexual excess more explicitly. She says that teens get the message that “exploring their bodies” through masturbation is “dangerous” because this exploration will act as a “gateway drug to sex,” thereby putting them at risk for “pregnancy, and … all those terrible things.” Girls thus receive the overall message to abstain not just from partnered sexual behaviors but also from masturbation, which Ellie says “mak[es] girls feel shame or … guilt about, like exploring their bodies.”

Like the notion that women’s sexuality is on the verge of being out of control (see Amy Today and Ashley2 above), Ellie explains that this social panic is rooted in fears that if women learn about their bodies through agentic exploration, they may be unable to stop themselves from (“gateway drug”) more “dangerous” behaviors like “sex.” In fact, the ability of this self-exploratory embodied sensation (she does not mention pleasure specifically, but it is implied) to lead to “terrible things” constructs masturbation itself as dangerous, not just sexual intercourse. And similar to Sally’s concern that she could be “ruin[ed]” for future partners, Ellie explains the
social fear that, for girls and young women, one drop of sexuality will inevitably produce a waterfall of uncontrollable impulses, which will lead to a landslide of consequences for young women (more on this below; McClelland & Fine, 2008a).

Overall, the narratives presented in this section illuminate another mechanism by which pleasure, shame, and confusion are braided together in these women’s solitary masturbation experiences – through fears of being excessive. Though participants find masturbation pleasurable, they worry about being out of control, addicted, and “too much.” Though these concerns sometimes overlap with the (religious and secular) moralizing imperatives of the previous section, these narratives highlight an oppressive rationale that underlies those ideas: women’s sexuality (and sexual pleasure) is shameful because it a dangerously slippery slope to overindulgence and other “terrible” consequences (more on consequences below). Fearing masturbatory sexual excess thus contributes to the maintenance of women’s sexual oppression. Rather than accepting women’s embodied pleasure as good, this fear may lead women to mistrust their bodies, regulate their sexualities, and feel ashamed.

**Masturbation must have consequences.** As the participants above alluded to, another common concern was that participants would experience some sort of negative consequence for masturbating. Ashley (White, Straight, 29), a self-described “late bloomer,” tells me that her parents did not talk to her about masturbation (“No, no, no … That would be weird”), but that she remembers peers in middle and high school joking about masturbation, mostly in terms of boys (“it was like a joking … again, I don’t remember anything about girls masturbating”). In terms of the messages she received, Ashley says to me, as almost a question, “I never had any positive messages about it growing up, … so I guess that’s a negative message in itself?” Ashley
described her first masturbation experience when she was a freshman in college as “scandalous” and “scary.” When I asked her what was scary about it, she explained:

I think I didn’t know what was going to happen. I don’t, I mean, I don’t know. I didn’t grow up religious, so I don’t have the, like, you’re-going-to-hell thing, but, I don’t know. What’s it going to mean? I didn’t know what it would mean, or like, how it would result, I guess. Um, and not even like, result, as in orgasm result, but just in general, like, what, how that would change or do anything to me. … I think, I expected it to be, I guess, m-, I don’t know, I don’t know if it was like I thought I was gonna become a bad person. That’s not what it was, but like, [whispers] I don’t know. [end whisper] Maybe I thought it was, gonna like, go have, like, wild, crazy sex everywhere. I don’t kn-, I don’t know. I, I, I think I thought something bad would happen, um, which is why I hadn’t, I’d waited so long.

Ashley’s narrative is filled with the confusion that she experienced both at the time (“I didn’t know”) and in the moment of the interview (“I don’t know”) as she looks back on the experience. She seems to be trying to work out, as she speaks, how she felt at the time and make sense of why she felt that way. Her primary confusion and source of fear (“scary”) seemed to be about “what was going to happen.” She clarifies that she does not mean this in a religious way (“I don’t have the … you’re-going-to-hell thing”) or even in terms of what might physically happen in her body (“not even … as in orgasm result”), but rather she “didn’t know what it would mean.” This sense that women’s sexual experiences are particularly laden with meanings is astute, since women are often stigmatized when they are perceived to have stepped over the ever-moving and inconsistent imaginary line of propriety (Rubin, 1984). Ashley wonders how masturbation might “change or do anything to [her],” implying that she may be concerned that
her masturbation experience will somehow act upon her (“do anything to me”) in a way that is out of her control.

As she talks, Ashley seems to be working through exactly what she thought (at the time) could happen to her. Would she “become a bad person?” (No, she decides, “that’s not what it was”). Would she “go have, like, wild, crazy sex everywhere?” In the end, she cannot decide “what it was” that was so “scandalous” and “scary” about the prospect of masturbating (“I don’t know”), but she “think[s]” she “thought something bad would happen,” and this, she explains, is “why … [she had] waited so long” to begin masturbating. Ashley’s concerns echo the moral concerns of those above that masturbation and women’s sexuality more broadly are immoral (“bad”). Her concern that if she masturbates she might suddenly be out of control (“go have, like, wild, crazy sex everywhere”), also echoes those above. And Ashley’s persistent fear that “something bad would happen” had a direct affect on her masturbation (it was “why … [she’d] waited so long”) and illustrates the fear of consequences that appears to play a part in the regulation of women’s pleasure-seeking behaviors.

While Ashley narrates a vague concern that there might be consequences to her solitary masturbation, others, like Sally (Haitian American [Black], Heterosexual, 33), are more explicit. Talking about her childhood, Sally tells me, “in Haitian culture, the woman’s vagina, I feel like, is very, like, talked about.” When I ask her to elaborate, she tells me that the women in her family talked a lot about “vagina care” including cleanliness (“how to wash”), discharge (“stuff coming out of there”), menstruation (“you shouldn’t put a tampon in there because you could get sick”), virginity (“if you could stop your pee in midstream, that meant … that you’ve had sex”), and birth (her sister got a “vagina wash after she had the baby … to remove the blood and tighten the vagina”), but Sally says that no one ever talked to her about masturbation (“No”). In Sally’s
narrative that is presented above, she discusses her first masturbation experience and the tension she felt between her embodied pleasure (“it was like, blow your mind”) and “feel[ing] bad.” She explained this tension in terms of the “messaging” she received about “not being an overly sexual person.” Here, she elaborates further on that first experience:

S: I didn’t know if it would cause harm or not, ‘cause there’s a lot of myths, uh, out there when you’re, like, a teenager of like, “Oh my God, your hand’s going to fall off.” Or some, you know. You don’t know what’s real and what’s not real. So, it could be just teenage angst, but I think part of it is, like, subconscious of, like, it, it this could hurt you in the long run. ‘Cause, especially ‘cause the message around sex is, like, “This is going to, there’s a lot of consequences to this.” Why wouldn’t this lead to a consequence? You know what I mean? There’s like, a lot of, like,

C: You definitely connected it to sex.

S: Yeah. Uh, it’s a part of, like, sex. That’s what I, yeah. So, I was like, if sex leads to consequences, why isn’t this going to do something bad to you? Like, could you not get wet anymore? Like, I thought about these things. I was, like, could you not get wet anymore? Could you, like, what else wo-, that was one that I thought of, and I was, like, could you break your clitoris? I was, like, could I, like, make the nerves be broken? [giggle] Like, s- yeah. I thought about breaking it. [giggle] Especially because my family was, also, about the vagina care. So, [laugh] like, let me just chill out before I break something.

Like many of the participants showcased above, Sally’s narrative is full of uncertainty (“I didn’t know” and “You don’t know what’s real and what’s not real”) and questioning (“Why wouldn’t this lead to a consequence?”), reflecting her lack of knowledge about masturbation at the time.
Similar to Ashley, Sally wonders whether “something bad” might happen to her, but Sally is much more specific in her imaginings, and narrates a concern not just that she might change as a person, but that she could actually be “harm[ed]” by masturbating. Specifically, she wondered whether her body would stop functioning properly – “could you not get wet anymore?” “could you break your clitoris?”

There are at least two possible interpretations of these imagined outcomes. On the one hand, feeling sensation in the clitoris and producing lubrication could be considered in excess of the traditional expectation that women’s (hetero)sexuality exists for reproduction or male pleasure (McClelland & Fine, 2008a; Rich, 1980). These phenomena refer to potentially embodied and pleasurable experiences, and Sally does not, for example, worry that masturbating would make her genitals look unattractive to a sexual partner or that it would alter her menstrual cycle – consequences that would reify these functional and relational definitions of women’s sexuality. On the other hand, Sally’s concerns could refer to her ability to properly perform her sexuality in a partnered context. Since women are expected to demonstrate their arousal during partnered sex so as to protect their partners’ feelings (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010), Sally’s concern about not being able to produce lubrication could stem from the ways she imagines that this consequence could impair her ability to perform her sexuality for her sexual partners.

However, both of these interpretations sit within a context of Sally’s Haitian culture and her family’s focus on “vagina care.” Haiti is a country that has, for decades, struggled with water and sanitation infrastructure and disease epidemics, and has used hygiene education programs as one of the primary modes of health improvement (Gelting et al., 2013). Perhaps the “vagina care” Sally learns from her family is an extension of this cultural focus on hygiene. “Vagina care,” as Sally explains, encompasses discharge, menstruation, virginity and birth – all aspects of
a woman’s health that require attention to cleanliness. Indeed, this cultural understanding that sexual hygiene and cleanliness are essential to women’s wellbeing – and that the result of poor hygiene is often disease – could also help explain Sally’s fear that masturbation “could hurt [her] in the long run.”

But beyond “vagina care,” Sally also connects her concerns (like participants above) to the “message around sex” that “there’s a lot of consequences to this.” Indeed, much social messaging about teenagers and sex focuses on the risks of sexual behavior (e.g., pregnancy and STIs; Fields, 2008; Fine & McClelland, 2006), and Black and Latina women are often constructed as particularly “at-risk” for sexual promiscuity (Garcia, 2012). “If sex leads to consequences,” Sally reasons, “why isn’t this [masturbation] going to do something bad to you?” By connecting her masturbation to the messages she has internalized (“subconscious”) about sex, particularly in the context of her Haitian culture, Sally astutely reasons that perhaps her masturbation could “hurt [her] in the long run.” The general negativity surrounding sex in American society (Rubin, 1984), particularly for women of color (Garcia, 2012), and the notion that women’s sexual pleasure is dangerous (Fine & McClelland, 2006; McClelland & Fine, 2008a; Vance, 1989; Weitz, 1989), creates a context of fear that anything sexual must be carefully managed and may also be accompanied by negative consequences. Sally, having grown up in a culture that is particularly attentive to issues of hygiene, and having not been taught specifically about masturbation, seems to synthesize the information available to her, and worries that her perfectly safe experience is somehow dangerous.

Masturbation could affect current or future sexual partners. Though I intentionally restricted my exploration in this dissertation to women’s experiences of solitary masturbation
(rather than mutual masturbation or any other form of partnered masturbation), concerns about partners were nevertheless present in these women’s narratives about their solitary masturbation (as several participants have hinted at above). Women brought their thoughts about partners into their narratives in two distinct ways: I) during masturbation experiences that occurred before any partnered sexual experiences, some women imagined the role of future partners; and II) as adults in sexual relationships currently, some women managed/navigated their own and their partners’ sexual and emotional needs/desires in regards to solitary masturbation.

**The partner imaginary during solitary masturbation.** A few participants narrated masturbation experiences that occurred before they had experienced partnered sex, and during which they imagined how future partners might be implicated. Asha (South Asian/White, Bi/Pansexual, 30) grew up in a “small cow town” in a “conservative area in Utah,” but her family was different from most of the families that lived there in terms of religion (“everyone there is Mormon, and my family wasn’t”), race (“most people are white, and my family wasn’t”), and politics (“they were very conservative, and my family wasn’t”). She tells me that she did not learn about masturbation in school (“no mention of masturbation at all”) or from her parents (“they assumed we got it in school”), but rather learned mostly from *Seventeen Magazine* (“I feel like *Seventeen Magazine* was the main place to learn about masturbation”). Specifically, she remembers “reading a description of what an orgasm felt like,” and that “there was some sort of graph” illustrating “a build of energy and then a release in waves, and there was a lot of pleasure or something like that.” Though Asha began masturbating as a very young child (“it could have been when I was like four or something. It’s as far back as I can remember”), it wasn’t until she read *Seventeen Magazine* around the age of twelve that she realized there was a name for her
experience (“Oh, that thing I do before I fall asleep every night? Oh!” for more on these types of experiences, see Chapter Four). Regarding her masturbation around this age, Asha says,

I had a fear of orgasming, because I thought that it was something I should save to do with, like, someone I cared about. That was definitely a message I got somehow. I don’t know exactly how. That was not in Seventeen [laugh]. … I remember, like, focusing a lot just on how it felt, and trying different things, and I wasn’t really thinking about anything other than just, like, the sensation, but then also, like feeling like, “oh, I am, like, I read and saw this graph of how the energy builds, and I’m experiencing it, like, maybe I should stop, ‘cause then I could have an orgasm, and I don’t want to waste it, when it could be special or something.”

Asha narrates an experience of masturbating in which she was negotiating multiple sources of information at once. She says she was exploring her embodied sensation (“focusing a lot just on how it felt, and trying different things”), thinking about the information she got from Seventeen Magazine (“the graph of how the energy builds”), and also incorporating the “message [she] got somehow” about “sav[ing]” her orgasms for “someone [she] cared about.” Though her experience sounds embodied (“how it felt” and “the sensation”), and playfully explorative (“trying different things”), these aspects of her experience seem to have been overshadowed by her “fear of orgasming.” At the time, Asha compared the sensations she felt in her body to the descriptions of arousal she had read in Seventeen (“this graph of how the energy builds, and I’m experiencing it”). Perhaps the “graph” she saw was some version of Masters and Johnson’s (1966) sexual response cycle. This intersection of embodied and discursive knowledge appears to lead Asha to question herself and shut down her body’s arousal (“maybe I should stop”). She explains her inclination to “stop” herself from “orgasming” in terms of imaginary future sexual
partners; she says, “I thought that it [orgasming] was something I should save to do with, like, someone I cared about.” This reasoning reflects the traditional definition of women’s sexuality as in service to sexual partners (Rich, 1980). Though Asha narrates an acute awareness of her body’s sexual response, she seems to have internalized (“a message I got somehow. I don’t know exactly how”) this notion that a woman’s sexuality should be evaluated in terms of its function for others (e.g., reproduction, male sexual pleasure). She “fear[s]” the orgasm her body is capable of because she does not want to “waste it, when it could be special or something.” This fear that her orgasm is dangerous (it could be a “waste”) echoes participants’ fears above, such as Sally’s concern that masturbation could “hurt you” or “ruin [you] for someone else.” These narratives illuminate regulatory mechanisms underlying the double standard about women’s sexuality that even the slightest hint of independent and agentic sexual pleasure can turn a Madonna into a whore (McClelland & Fine, 2008a).

While Asha worried that her solitary orgasms might be a “waste” if they happened without someone she cared about, Cici (White, Straight, 30) wondered how future sexual partners would be able to replicate the orgasms she gave herself through masturbation. Cici’s mother, who was “very open” about sex, talked to Cici about masturbation when she was nine or ten years old. She explained that masturbation is “something that you can do for yourself” for “relaxing,” “pleasure,” and “to be in tune with your body.” At the time, Cici says she felt “kind of weird” and “awkward” about the conversation, and says that she was more interested in what her mother told her about sex than masturbation (“I don’t care about my body, but, like, oh my god, boys do that to girls?”). She did not start masturbating until a few years after this initial conversation (“maybe around, like, twelve, thirteen”), and by this time she felt “very ambitious.” She “stole” a disc-like vibrating “foot massager” from her mother to “try this out,” and “see if
this works.” After using the massager to masturbate a few times, she had her first orgasm, and says she thought to herself, “this is great!” I ask her what else she was thinking about at the time, and she says,

I remember thinking, like, “Oh my God. How am I supposed to do this with a guy?”

Which was interesting, because, um, I don’t think that should be the first thought.

[giggle] You know what I mean? Like, it should be, like “How can I do this? How can I do this again?” Versus, like, “How can I do this with a boy?” You know? [giggle] Like “I like Barry. You know? [giggle] How’s he going to do this – with his penis? But how, like, you know? How does he, you know, hit the clitoris? How’s this going to happen?”

Like Asha, Cici imagines future sexual partners in her early solitary masturbation experiences. Rather than concerns about “wast[ing]” her orgasm (as Asha had), Cici wonders how she is going to be able to recreate her orgasm during heterosexual intercourse (“how’s he going to do this – with his penis?”). Like Amelia above, who assumed that their masturbation should involve penetration, Cici’s immediate concern with “do[ing] this with a guy” implies an assumption that women’s masturbation should somehow reflect heterosexual intercourse. When she imagines future sexual experiences with a partner, she presumes that her partner’s “penis” should be able to “hit the clitoris,” and she does not imagine that a sexual partner could stimulate her clitoris by other means (even though she does this herself). This presumption exemplifies what Hannah Frith (2013) has called the *coital imperative* – the notion that intercourse is essential to sex and is the most natural expression of sexuality (Gavey, McPhillips, & Braun, 1999). Though Cici’s narrative relies on this discourse, she also takes a moment to say that she “[doesn’t] think” her thoughts about a future partner “should be” the “first” thing she thought about after having her first orgasm. Instead, she says she “should” have thought about how to recreate the orgasm
herself ("how can I do this again?"). Indeed, Cici’s “very ambitious” pursuit of bodily knowledge (her curiosity led her to “try this out,” and “see if this works”), and her willful determination to keep learning, suggests that Cici believes women should be invested in providing themselves with orgasms and should not only rely on others.

Furthermore, though Cici constructs her experience partially in terms of heterosexual intercourse, her agency and entitlement to sexual pleasure in partnered contexts are also apparent. She recognizes the importance of her clitoris for her orgasm (“How does he, you know, hit the clitoris?”), and wonders to herself how the logistics of sexual intercourse will provide her with enough clitoral stimulation. Cici makes the assumption that stimulation of her clitoris and orgasms will be a part of her future partnered sexual encounters – this is not in question for her. Her confusion seems to revolve around how that stimulation will happen, not whether it will. In this way, Cici demonstrates sexual agency in her partner imaginary, positioning herself as entitled to sexual pleasure during partnered sex.

_Navigating current sexual partners regarding solitary masturbation._ While some participants imagined the role of future sexual partners in their early solitary masturbation experiences, others connected their solitary masturbation to current sexual partners. Alice (Black/Asian, Heterosexual, 29) is one such example. In the memo I wrote after interviewing Alice, I wrote that she was “probably the most laid-back person I’ve talked to yet.” She had been a camp counselor growing up, a Resident Advisor (RA) during college, and had led workshops on sexuality in her leadership role as an RA. I was lucky to be talking to such an easy-going person on this particular day, because we were interrupted several times by a faculty member who insisted that we leave the room we were using thirty minutes before our scheduled time was
up, so her student could prepare (early) for a defense. Despite my protests, we were forced to switch locations in the middle of the interview, and I was concerned that the rapport I had built with Alice and the comfort we had developed with one another would somehow be affected by this interruption. Fortunately, Alice seemed relaxed and unfazed. During our transition to another location, she gamely began chatting with me about the Q sort cards, and started to explain her opinion about the card that read, “It’s understandable for someone to feel upset if they catch their sexual partner masturbating.” I had not yet set up the recorder in the new room, and so I asked her to try to remember all of the things she was telling me so that I could record her once we were settled. After we sat down and I turned the recorder back on, I asked if she could tell me again her thoughts on that card. She says,

   Um, the, the, the question [referring to Q sort cards], I forgot where, it, it was like, “would, is it understandable to be upset if you caught your significant other masturbating?” I, like, if I think about it, masturbating in your relationship shouldn’t be n-, should be no big deal, but I think my reaction would be, like, “if you, w-, like, why don’t you just, why didn’t we just go have sex? [laugh] Like, why aren’t we having sex? Why are you masturbating?” Um, I, I think it is understandable, because I’m just trying to wrap my head around wh-, uh, what would be the bonus of masturbating when you can have sex. When it’s there, and it’s just, like, there’s, you could have, you could put them both together! And like [laugh] Un-, unless it’s just, like, quick and, like, I’m in the sh-, sh-, I don’t, yeah. I, it’s a weird thing. I think I would feel bothered by, like, we’d have to have a conversation [laugh] about what’s going on in our relationship, where, uh, you’re masturbating and we’re not having sex. [laugh] … Because, uh, obviously I’m just like, why is it wrong? Or why would it be bothersome to? ‘Cause I think, for me, it just, it
signals that there’s some reason why you guys aren’t being intimate together, and, and, and yeah. Like, if I had a regular sex partner who was there with me all the time, I probably would not masturbate.

Alice leads me through her thought process in this narrative, explaining why she would feel upset (“I think it is understandable”) if she caught her partner masturbating. She first offers the disclaimer that “masturbating in your relationship … should be no big deal,” which could perhaps be a belief that she carries with her from her sex-positive and pleasure-positive background as a sexuality educator. However, after naming this standard (“should”), she relays how she actually would feel if she caught a sexual partner masturbating: “why didn’t we just go have sex?” Alice says it is hard for her to “wrap [her] head around” the idea that there could be any “bonus of masturbating when you can have sex.” She says that though it is “a weird thing,” she “think[s] [she] would feel bothered,” and she would “have to have a conversation” with her partner about “what’s going on in [their] relationship,” because if a partner is “masturbating and [they’re] not having sex … it signals that there’s some reason why you guys aren’t being intimate together.”

Alice seems to prioritize sex with her partner over solitary masturbation; perhaps she sees her sexual relationship with her partner as a barometer for “what’s going on in [the] relationship” more broadly, and as a signal for some deeper “reason why you guys aren’t being intimate together.” Throughout the narrative, though, Alice interjects brief moments of doubt. Besides her initial disclaimer, she also nearly concedes that there may be certain contexts in which masturbating while in a relationship could be acceptable (e.g., when masturbation is fast: “unless it’s just, like, quick and, like, I’m in the sh-, sh-, I don’t, yeah” – is “sh-” the beginning of the word “shower?”), but she does not actually finish this thought, instead concluding again that she
still “would feel bothered.” She also briefly asks herself, “Why is it wrong? Or Why would it be bothersome?” but then decides again that the answer to these questions is that they “signal” a lack of “intimacy.”

In her closing thoughts on this topic, Alice flips her perspective from thinking about how she would feel about a sexual partner masturbating, to thinking about her own solitary masturbation: “if I had a regular sex partner who was there with me all the time, I probably would not masturbate.” With this statement, Alice appears to demonstrate that she holds herself to the same standards she has set for her sexual partners, and perhaps even that the reason she sets this standard for her partners is that it is her own inclination anyway. It is unclear whether Alice would “not masturbate” because she would feel no desire to or because she would see it as inappropriate in the context of her relationship, but in any case, she makes clear that her solitary masturbation practices are affected by her relationship status (i.e., having “a regular sex partner who was there with me all the time”).

While Alice speaks from the perspective of someone who would be “bothered” by her partner masturbating, other participants narrate concerns about how their partners might react to their own solitary masturbation. Kristy (White, Heterosexual, 27) began masturbating around the age of twelve, but did not “really know what it was” until later in high school (more on these types of childhood masturbation experiences in Chapter Four). She met her husband when she was twenty-two, and he remains her only sexual partner. When I ask Kristy if she has ever worried about getting caught masturbating, she mentions the relatively common concerns among participants that she worried about her parents while living at home, and roommates while in college, but then she adds,

K: I mean, I think, I feel like my husband isn’t really, like, that open, so I feel like, like,
I’ve caught him, but I feel like I would be embarrassed if he caught me, in a way? Um, so, I don’t know. I, I think I kind of wait, until times when I know he’s going to be gone for a certain amount of time um, or I know, like, where he is. Um, yeah.

C: What do you think he would think if he were to catch you? Like, what would happen?

K: I don’t know. I mean, I feel like, [5 second pause] I don’t know. I feel like he kind of, has a perspective a little bit about, like, that’s something men do more. Um, yeah. And like, why, like, if we’re in a relationship, why am I still doing that?

Kristy echoes Alice above in narrating the idea that a sexual relationship should trump a person’s solitary masturbation (“if we’re in a relationship, why am I still doing that?”). But unlike Alice, Kristy speaks about her own concerns about getting “caught” by her husband (“I would be embarrassed”), who, she explains, is not “that open.” She says that she thinks her husband’s “perspective” about masturbation is that it is “something men do more,” but it seems as though Kristy may share this perspective, since she expresses no concern about having “caught” her husband masturbating, but says she herself would feel “embarrassed” if he “caught” her. Her husband’s apparent belief that masturbation is “something men do more” alongside his belief that being “in a relationship” signals a lesser need for solitary masturbation (“why am I still doing that?”), reveals a double standard within this heterosexual relationship. The logic appears to apply to Kristy only, since her husband continues to masturbate (and she does not question this), while she relays a keen awareness of the judgment she would incur were he to know about her masturbation. This double standard may work to maintain the notion that women’s sexual pleasure is not only unnecessary, but may also threaten the traditional aims of heterosexuality (male pleasure and/or reproduction; Rich, 1980), and that any sexual pleasure or orgasm a woman experiences is a bonus (Frith, 2013). The sexual pleasure Kristy experiences during
partnered sex should apparently be enough. While Alice seemed to accept this notion wholeheartedly (“if I had a regular sex partner who was there with me all the time, I probably would not masturbate”), Kristy sounds less convinced. She says that her husband’s stance leads her to “wait” to masturbate “until times when [she] know[s] he’s going to be gone for a certain amount of time.” Kristy therefore modifies her solitary masturbation behavior in response to the interpersonal dynamics of her romantic and sexual relationship, but she nevertheless willfully insists on continuing to masturbate.

Because the traditional aims of women’s sexuality (i.e., male pleasure and/or reproduction) are constructed based on heterosexual norms (Rich, 1980; Weitz, 1989), it might be expected that hiding one’s solitary masturbation from a sexual partner would be more common among heterosexual women. However, in my sample, women of diverse sexual orientations narrated this experience, and Asia Niece (African American, “Asia” [when I asked what she meant, she said her sexual orientation is just “me”], 30) serves as an exemplar. Asia Niece grew up going to church “six days out of the week,” and tells me her church was a “really good church home” because it was a “judge-free zone;” she “loved church,” and never learned “anything negative” about masturbation there. Though her god sister had encouraged her to try masturbating (“Yo, you should try it”) since “eighth or ninth grade,” she did not begin masturbating until college. She describes her first experience with lots of curiosity, like many of the women above, and she was attempting to recreate the orgasm she had first experienced with her girlfriend (“let me just see what happens”). After days of “experimenting,” Asia tells me she felt “pretty cool” that she “could make [her]self, [her] body do something that [she] never thought it would be able to do” (more on her feelings of embodied agency in Chapter Five). As she talks about how “cool” it is that she “know[s] [her] body better than anybody else,” she
begins to discuss her fiancée. Though her fiancée is “great at other things,” Asia says, “it is hard for her … to give me an orgasm.” Asia says she is not distressed by this at all (“I’m perfectly fine with that”), because Asia “can do that part [her]self.” However, in practice, this self-determination has been slightly more complicated. She says,

A: I would just, like, randomly start, like, masturbating next to her, and she would get really upset about it.

C: Why do you think she was upset?

A: Because she wasn’t the one doing it. Or, if she wasn’t in the mood and I was, and I would do it, and that would upset her. If she wasn’t, if she wasn’t the one doing it, she’d be upset about it. …

C: Is that how it is still, now in your relationship?

A: Mm mm [indicating no]. Mm mm [indicating no]

C: How is it now?

A: Um, I don’t, I, I respect her. So, you know, I don’t ever want to, um, I do it when she’s not there. … I just know that I respect her enough to make sure I don’t do it in front of her. And, um, and I’m completely fine with that. You know, um, I would, I would never, I try my best not to purposely upset her. You know? So, I mean, that’s something I can clearly control.

Asia Niece says that her tendency to “randomly start… masturbating next to” her partner would make her partner “really upset” because her partner “wasn’t the one” providing Asia with the stimulation. Even when Asia was “in the mood” but her partner “wasn’t,” if Asia masturbated, her partner would “be upset about it.” But after learning this about her partner, Asia changes her approach out of “respect [for] her.” She says that she masturbates “when she’s not there” and
“respect[s] her enough to make sure [she doesn’t] do it in front of her.” Again, she narrates not finding this distressing (“I’m completely fine with that”), and seems to see the self-imposed regulation of her solitary masturbation as reasonable and “something I can clearly control.”

Though she, like Kristy, modifies her behavior so as to masturbate only when her partner is “not there,” Asia Niece’s logic sounds very different. While both Kristy and Asia Niece monitor their solitary masturbation out of concern for their partners’ feelings (Kristy: his “perspective” is “if we’re in a relationship, why am I still doing that?” Asia Niece: “She’d be upset about it”), Kristy hides her masturbation from her husband out of fear of embarrassment, whereas Asia Niece “tr[ies] [her] best not to purposely upset” her partner. Nevertheless, both women sense their partners’ potential or real emotional reactions to their solitary masturbation, and modify their behavior accordingly. Though Kristy navigates this dilemma in the context of an opposite-sex relationship and Asia Niece navigates it in a same-sex one, the differences between their narratives do not reflect any larger difference between sexual minority and heterosexual participants in my sample (see Chapter Two: Methods). Both sexual minority and heterosexual women discussed worrying about hurting their partners’ feelings and both also worried about their own feelings being hurt. Women in both groups also expressed feelings of embarrassment as well as feelings of respect for their partners. Considering that the institution of heterosexuality traditionally defines women’s sexuality in terms of men (male sexual pleasure and reproduction; Rich, 1980), it might be predicted that women who are in sexual relationships with other women could somehow sidestep the regulatory social norm that defines their sexual pleasure as excessive or their sexuality as primarily partner-focused. However, this prediction is not supported by my data. Women who were in relationships with women narrated very similar concerns to women who were in relationships with men, and in all cases, the common
denominator appeared to be not wanting to hurt one’s partner’s feelings (or have one’s own feelings be hurt). It thus appears that it is not necessarily a threat to male partners that can explain these women’s partner focus during solitary masturbation, but rather the notion that deliberate self-pleasure – pleasure that is directed inward and not meant to involve anyone else – is counter-normative for women.

Managing one’s own and others’ emotions for the improvement of social relationships – known as emotion work – has traditionally been considered primarily the responsibility of women (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). In the context of women’s sexuality, researchers have refined this construct and labeled it relational sex work, which is the often-unacknowledged management of women’s own and their partners’ desires, pleasures, and activities (Cacchioni, 2007; Fahs, 2014a). This type of work is reflected in both Kristy’s and Asia Nieces’ partner-oriented narratives. Kristy assesses her husband’s thoughts and feelings (he “isn’t really, like, that open” and his “perspective” is that “if we’re in a relationship, why am I still doing that?”) and modifies her behavior (she “wait[s]” until “he’s going to be gone”) to avoid upsetting him. Similarly, Asia Niece evaluates how her fiancée feels about her solitary masturbation (“she would get really upset”), works to understand what is underlying these emotions (“she wasn’t the one doing it [stimulating Asia Niece]”), and changes her behavior (“I do it when she’s not there”) to avoid hurting her (“I try my best not to purposely upset her”). But Asia Niece’s narrative suggests that she may be working on her own emotions as well. She says she is “completely fine with” changing her behavior, but this statement itself could be an effort to align her emotions with what she infers her partner needs (what Hochschild [1983] would call deep acting). Regardless, both of these participants manage their solitary sexual desires and behaviors for the sake of their partners’ emotions.
These narratives shed light on the interpersonal nature of solitary sexual experiences. Even when these women masturbated in physical solitude, current or imagined sexual partners often crept into the equation. Like the themes of morality, sexual excess, and consequences for masturbation, participants’ concern with sexual partners constitutes another way in which these women think of their solitary masturbation experiences as governed by similar social norms and discourses as women’s sexuality more broadly. These four ways in which the women in my sample link solitary masturbation to larger oppressive norms construct masturbation as something dangerous, overindulgent, depraved, scary, or, at the very least, contentious.

Conclusion

Ten years ago, a sixteen-year-old named Jacqui asked Sara McClelland and Michelle Fine (2008a), “So, it’s the same thing, right, like being wet and having an orgasm, right?” Her question was more than just an expression of confusion or ignorance or even a desire for more information. Her question revealed a deeper sort of yearning – an amorphous wanting that asked not just for pleasure, not just for orgasms, not just for knowledge, but also for understanding. I, too, have heard this wanting. I have listened as my participants narrated experiences of embodied bliss followed by timid queries: Is this weird? Is this right? Is this too much? They asked these questions with trepidation – after all, to even ask is to have crossed the line into excess – but also with willful curiosity.

The women in my sample told me stories of shame, guilt, fear, and uncertainty alongside stories of curiosity, determination, pleasure, and will. They told me about how the negative lessons they learned from society had frozen them in their tracks – they hid their masturbation, denied it, and promised to bury it forever. They worried that “something bad” was sure to come
of masturbation (like any expression of sexuality), whether it be heavenly scorn, addiction, impotence, or “ruin.” Though they were in physical solitude, these women often positioned their experiences as relational and dynamic, intertwined with others both real and imagined. But these stories were accompanied by other stories – confident stories about the embodied knowledge that resonated from within women themselves. They told me about how, in their bodies, masturbation felt wonderful, if also sometimes “weird.” They told me stories of exploration, discovery, dedication, and playfulness (more on these in Chapters 4 and 5). And because they insisted upon what they felt in their bodies just as resolutely as they navigated the mandates of their (hetero)sexist and racist society, their uncertainty and doubt remained continually grounded by their embodied experiences.

Women’s confusion at the time seems to stem from the fact that many participants did not know (and were often kept from knowing) that masturbation is safe, gender-neutral, and common. When Tuana (2004) wrote about an epistemology of ignorance, it was this type of socially produced ignorance to which she was referring: ignorance of the information that could work to liberate. If the women in my sample had possessed knowledge of masturbation that was provided by alternative discursive sources (such as the normalizing rhetoric of medicine, or the focus on lived embodiment characteristic of much of feminism), would they have felt so confused? Would they have doubted their experiences and questioned their bodies? Would they have been ashamed? Tuana (2004) argues that it is through this actively produced ignorance that systems of oppression are maintained, and my data supports this. It appears that because these women lacked knowledge of masturbation as safe, healthy, and common, they experienced negative emotions about masturbation and restricted their masturbation practices, thereby cutting
themselves off to sexual pleasure, and maintaining the traditional definition of women’s (hetero)sexuality as functional.

But my data also suggests that these women’s sexual understanding and uncertainty, both in discursive and embodied terms, are messy and multiple. The women in my sample narrated knowledge of some discourses but not others; they narrated partial knowledge of discourses and used conjecture to split the difference; they narrated both knowledge and confusion about their embodied sensations; and they narrated the cognitive task of attempting to make sense of it all. The power and agency that these women experienced when they insisted on learning about how to provide themselves with sexual pleasure (embodied knowledge) collided spectacularly with the stigmas they had internalized (discursive knowledge) to produce experiences of confusion, silence, shame, and resolve. Like Jacqui, the women I spoke to did not allow the social norms of their worlds to snuff out their willful desire, but instead relentlessly strove to comprehend; they asked “from [their] bod[ies] – is this all there is? Is there more?” (McClelland & Fine, 2008a, p. 84). Though their questions often went long unanswered, their wanting and embodiment drove them onward, and, as I will continue to elaborate in the next two chapters, provided them with the foundations for resistance.
Chapter Four: “It Was Just Something that Felt Good”

Solitary Masturbation Experiences in Childhood as Extra-Discursive

Lived Embodiment
Experts in child development acknowledge that children of all ages masturbate, and that this self-stimulation is an exploratory pleasure-seeking behavior (Mallants & Casteels, 2008). However, parents and schools rarely discuss masturbation with children (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013), and when they do, they may discourage the behavior, particularly in the case of girls (Gagnon, 1985). Putting the discouragement of masturbation aside for a moment, if children have not yet received any information about solitary masturbation from their parents, I wondered what sort of knowledge they possess – if any – about the cultural meanings of their behavior. In the previous chapter, I presented evidence that girls and women may internalize negative social messages about sexuality and may apply these messages to their solitary sexual experiences as well. Pre-pubescent children may have been exposed to discourses governing women’s sexuality more broadly (e.g., the notion that women should not be overly sexual [McClelland & Fine, 2008a]), but may not have been exposed to information about solitary masturbation in particular. Though social constructionists argue that all experiences, even solitary ones, are embedded within discourse (Foucault, 1977, 1978), if a person has not yet been exposed to the discourses that typically govern specific behaviors or sensations, they could theoretically have experiences that exist outside the regulatory grip of discourse; Cain (1993) labels these experiences extra-discursive (see Introduction), and suggests that such experiences (e.g., an experience of coercive sex that feels “pressurized” but it not [yet] labeled “sexual violence”) “pre-exist [their] possible utterance” (p. 83). As I listened to women’s narratives, I noticed that some women described experiences during childhood that sounded extra-discursive. In a context of so little sharing of information about masturbation, it seemed that some women experienced their childhood self-stimulation as somehow free from discursive
regulation. I wondered whether these experiences might also be free from the guilt and shame that were so prevalent among participants later in their lives.\textsuperscript{23}

In this chapter, I explore women’s narratives of childhood masturbation as a means to better understand this extra-discursive possibility. I identified participants who sounded as though they had had extra-discursive masturbation experiences as children using the following criteria: First, the experiences must have occurred during childhood, which I define as before puberty or on the verge of puberty (i.e., around twelve years of age or younger).\textsuperscript{24} Second, the experiences must have been narrated as embodied sensations that participants, at the time of the experiences, were not able to make sense of within a discursive framework governing masturbation. That is, these experiences are narrated as having existed without having been “discoursed” (Cain, 1993) or “languaged” (Frost et al., 2014; see Introduction for more on this). Eleven women in my sample discussed masturbation experiences as children that met these criteria and sounded as though they had existed briefly outside of discourse. Through an exploration of these extra-discursive childhood masturbation experiences, I begin to illuminate

\textsuperscript{23} As I noted in the Introduction, my suggestion that experiences that exist outside of language (extra-discursive experiences) could be liberatory is a shift from the common feminist understanding of the role of language in women’s liberation. For example, Michelle Fine (1988) argues in her classic paper on the “missing discourse of desire” that the fact that girls’ and women’s desire is \textit{not} named creates a society in which women’s desire remains hidden and stigmatized. In this chapter, however, I suggest a phenomenon that is somewhat the reverse of this logic; because women’s solitary masturbation remains so stigmatized, I suggest that \textit{not} having access to the language and/or cultural meanings of this activity could actually benefit girls and women by allowing them a brief window of cognitive freedom from discursive regulation (for a discussion on the notion that feminists should focus on women’s \textit{freedom from} oppressive discourses in addition to focusing on women’s \textit{freedom to} expand their sexual options, see Fahs, 2014b).

\textsuperscript{24} Hogarth & Ingham (2009), Kaestle & Allen (2011), and Watson & McKee (2013) do not define the age that participants were when their parents neglected to talk to them about masturbation, but Gagnon (1985) defines children as “pre-adolescent” in his study of parents of three- to eleven-year-olds.
the ways in which knowledge and ignorance are produced and maintained (Tuana, 2004), and in particular, how different forms of knowledge/ignorance (i.e., discursive and/or embodied) may constitute resistance to or freedom from oppressive discourses.

**Self-Discovery of Masturbation as a Free-Floating Embodied Sensation**

Despite reporting that they received very little direct information about masturbation as young children, many women discovered the behavior themselves. Participants’ narrations of erotic self-discovery included descriptions of positive embodied sensations, which were perceived as new, and for which participants, at the time, had no label or broader social understanding. For instance, Kristy (White, Heterosexual, 27), explains her memories of masturbating around age twelve:

> I don’t think I really knew, like, what it [masturbation] was called, necessarily or, like, what it, I don’t think I really knew what it was, but I feel like there was, like, a certain, like, physical feeling, but I didn’t know what that meant.

Though she recalls an embodied sensation (“a certain, like, physical feeling”), Kristy’s narrative is filled with uncertainty and not knowing. She says, “I don’t think I really knew” twice, suggesting that she is struggling to remember what she knew, but does not “think” she knew what her behavior “was called” or “was.” In contrast to this uncertainty, Kristy says, “I feel like there was, like, a certain, like physical feeling.” She uses hedging words such as “I feel like” and “like” as she constructs her narrative. Perhaps she is still trying to remember what the experience was like for her, or is struggling to put into words a sensory experience. Her narration of this embodied experience is bracketed before and after by descriptions of what she did not know, including “what that [physical feeling] meant.” As a twelve-year-old, Kristy probably had been
exposed to and lived within broader discourses regulating women’s and girls’ sexuality (Brown, Halpern, & L’Engle, 2005), but seems to not have connected those discourses to what she experienced during her solitary masturbation. It seems that Kristy experienced a physical sensation in her body, but did not yet have any understanding of the cultural meanings (“what that meant”), or even a label (“what it was called”), for the experience.

Some women described these early experiences of erotic discovery as a surprising happenstance moment in which their genitals were accidentally stimulated and they then reflected on that sensation. For example, Dylan (Latina, Straight, 28) recounts her earliest memory of masturbating, which was around the age of eleven:

I think just one day-, I mu-, must have had, like, something in between my legs or something, and then I moved, or whatever, a certain way. I was, like, “Oh, that kind of feels nice.” And then, you know, then I just started touching myself, and I was kind of like, “Oh, this feels really nice.” [giggle] Like, “This is kind of cool.” … Um, I think, I think the first time, it was very surprising, ‘Cause I was, like, and I didn’t really, really have a name for it, um, until you know, I don’t know when, but um, yeah. The first time definitely surprised me.

Dylan, like Kristy, describes an experience of noticing and following the responses of bodily feelings for which she “didn’t really … have a name” when she recalled her earliest memory of masturbating. Also similar to Kristy, her age suggests the possibility that she had been exposed to some sexual discourses, but she does not seem to connect those discourses about sexuality to this early masturbation experience. She narrates this childhood experience in somewhat uncertain terms; she opens her story tentatively – “I think” and “I must have” – suggesting that she is unsure or reconstructing the memory of this experience as best she can, but was also filling in the
gaps ("I must have"). With "something in between [her] legs," she moved "a certain way," and noticed an embodied sensation "that kind of feels nice," an experience that was "kind of cool" and "very surprising." That embodied experience was enjoyable ("nice") enough to motivate Dylan to try to recreate it: after noticing that it felt "nice," she "just started touching [her]self." She used the sensations she felt in her body to evaluate the experience, and again seemed surprised ("Oh") to discover that intentionally touching herself, rather than just stumbling upon a sensation, was also very pleasurable ("this feels really nice"). While at the time, she judged the experience to be "kind of cool" – a phrase that is hesitantly ("kind of") positive – exactly what about the experience she was judging to be "kind of cool" is murky. She could be referring to the pleasurable sensation or to the newfound knowledge that she had the power to produce that sensation herself. She describes the experience at first tentatively – "I think … it was very surprising" – and, as she finishes putting her experience into words, is sure – "The first time definitely surprised me." She connects this surprise to the absence of language for her embodied experience (either the sensation or her response to it by masturbating), saying, "'Cause … I didn’t … really have a name for it." The combination of circumstances that Dylan narrates – the embodied sensation that came as a pleasurable surprise to her alongside the lack of a label for her experience – illuminates the possibility that Dylan did not have access to any larger discourse about masturbation with which to make meaning of what happened. There is a notable absence in her story of dominant discourses such as those outlined in the previous chapter (e.g., solitary masturbation as shameful, women’s sexual pleasure as dangerously excessive), or of the negative emotions regarding her solitary sexual experience that were audible in the narratives of women who seemed to have internalized these discourses (e.g., guilt, worry, fear). With only information
from her own body to access, Dylan appears to have been able to explore her extra-discursive pleasure autonomously and without shame.

Some women were more concrete than Dylan about the explorative nature of these childhood experiences. Kristine (White/Serbian, Straight, 32), for example, describes her experience of embodied self-discovery around the age of twelve:

I think maybe I had a dream and then I started moving myself on the mattress and that’s how I felt that this is something that brings me pleasure. I think that’s how. I don't think it was necessarily, uh, attached to an actual boy or like the images, or fantasies, it was really a physical um, manifestation, that’s how I remember it. I don't think it was anything really sexual in a way of like, fantasy or, it was a really a physical, relaxation, or whatever, I don't know. I guess in that moment when I f- felt that as a kid I think it was, it must have been such an overwhelming feeling, not knowing what it actually was. … I don't point blank remember. But, it seems like it was something that felt um, like an adventure you know it felt like, um, it was exciting it was um, … surprising. I guess I didn't think it was like, anticipated, for example, as your period, like this is something you’re, you anticipate. This is something that just happened and no one ever told you that this can happen, or you don’t even know what it is, and then you probably go back and try and do it again.

Kristine’s narration of embodied self-discovery echoes Kristy’s and Dylan’s in which they paid close attention to what they felt in their bodies. She narrates an early experience in which she “had a dream and then [she] started moving [her]self on the mattress.” Through this process, she discovered pleasurable embodied sensations; she says, “that’s how I felt that this is something that brings me pleasure,” suggesting that this was an act that remained undefined but definite –
moving in this way was “something.” Also similar to those above, Kristine explains that at the
time, she did “not know what it actually was,” and so she found the experience “surprising.” But
she also conveyed a sense of excitement (“it was exciting”) and bold curiosity (“like an
adventure”) about this new discovery. Kristine explains these emotions by referencing her
ignorance; she juxtaposes the surprise of discovering an embodied self-eroticism with a
developmental milestone that was not surprising to her – getting her first period. Unlike “your
period,” which “is something … you anticipate,” masturbation and/or self-induced embodied
pleasure (it is unclear whether she is referring to one or both of these) “is something that just
happened and no one ever told you that this can happen.” Like those above, Kristine appears to
have had some discursive knowledge surrounding women’s sexuality – she knew something
about menstruation – but the sensation of sexual pleasure for which she had no name (and/or the
newfound capacity to provide herself with this pleasure) seems to remain outside of her
discursive knowledge. Nevertheless, in a context of not “even know[ing] what it is,” which
“must have” felt “overwhelming,” Kristine makes clear that this ignorance did not inhibit her
curiosity, but instead seemed to feed it: after this unexpected experience, “you probably go back
and try and do it again.”

Kristine’s narrative contains a common explanatory mechanism among participants who
remembered masturbating as children: she says that an important reason why her experience was
characterized by embodied pleasure and playful exploration was that at the time, she did not
consider the experience sexual. Her masturbation was not “attached to an actual boy” or any
other “images or fantasies;” it was not “anything really sexual.” Instead, she says, “it was really a
physical … manifestation.” By setting up this comparison, Kristine makes use of knowledge she
has as an adult – that solitary masturbation is considered a sexual behavior – to claim that her
childhood experiences of masturbation did not fit this mold. Rather than being “sexual,” her experience was “really a physical” one. She seems to make use of a discursive lens of sexuality to position her earliest masturbation experiences as outside its regulation.

Like Dylan and Kristy, Kristine sounds as if she has trouble remembering exactly what happened and is instead reconstructing her experience based on what she thinks “must have” occurred. All three examples of Memory Work suggest that these women are not only attempting to put into words what “really happened” (Haug, 2008), but are also reconstructing their memories based on their current social worlds. Kristine, for example, does not “point blank remember” how she felt about this first masturbation experience, but says, “it must have been such an overwhelming feeling, not knowing what it actually was.” This implies that as an adult, she does know “what it actually was” – beyond just a “physical … manifestation” that “brings me pleasure,” she presumably also recognizes the feeling retrospectively as sexual. Thinking back on how such an experience might have felt for her without the knowledge she now possesses, she reconstructs the emotional state of being “overwhelm[ed].” Perhaps her feelings of excitement and “adventure” are similar reconstructions, which allow Kristine to think of her childhood self as an active explorer of her own sensations. By the end of her narration, though, she has switched from using “I” language to using the more general “you” to describe what “probably” happened, further suggesting that where her memory fails her, it is “written anew” (Haug, 2008, p. 538).

Kristine’s experience of embodied self-discovery illuminates the possibility that the lack of knowledge of certain discourses, rather than being only a means to uphold oppressive structures (e.g., Fine, 1988; Tuana, 2004), can also create the cognitive space for playful curiosity and pleasurable embodied knowledge making. That is, though Kristine’s self-discovery
of masturbation appears, like Kristy’s and Dylan’s, to have existed outside of discourse, Kristine
does not describe her lack of knowledge of what her behavior or sensations “actually [were]” in
oppressive terms. Instead, she notes that the embodied sensation was “pleasurable,” and that
the experience itself was a sort of “adventure.” Her stance sounds willful and empowered
because she took the initiative to recreate the pleasure she discovered (“try and do it again”),
even though she did not “know what it [was].” In this way, Kristine’s experience harkens to
Foucault’s (1978) call for a focus on “bodies and pleasures” (p. 157) as a bedrock of resistance to
oppression, but because she seemed to have no knowledge of the stigma attached to
masturbation, her autonomous and adventurous approach to the sensations she felt in her body
may represent a brief moment of freedom from – rather than resistance to – the grip of oppressive
discourses.

While the narrations of childhood masturbation I have presented so far have lacked
discourses of shame, danger, or other dominant ideologies that might be expected based on the
findings presented in the previous chapter, a few women named their lack of shame explicitly.
Eve (White, Straight, 24), who began masturbating “before puberty,” says:

I think I was doing it before I really learned about it, or had any real education about it…
I feel like my mom caught me once. And, like, I didn’t even, I was so little, and I didn’t
really know what it was. … So, at one point, she walked in, and I was doing it. I don’t
think I even stopped. [laugh] I was, like, really little and didn’t have any shame about
it. … I think at that age, it was just something that felt good. It wasn’t even necessarily
sexual yet? Or, or I guess, if it was, I wouldn’t have had the, any con-, any way to
connect it to sex? So, it was just more like touching myself there felt good, and so I was
Like the participants above, Eve says she was masturbating “before [she] really learned about it, or had any real education about it,” that she did not “really know what it was,” and that the experience was characterized by a sort of free-floating embodied pleasure (“it was just something that felt good”). But Eve also explicitly states that she “didn’t have any shame about it,” which suggests that as an adult, she understands that shame surrounding masturbation is a dominant discourse, and so she may feel that it is necessary for her to address the fact that it was missing for her. In her story about masturbating as a young child and being “caught” by her mother, Eve seemed not the least bit bothered. The terror of getting “caught” masturbating is a component of the dominant discourse that constructs masturbation as something taboo and secretive, and popular representations of people being caught masturbating often portray the masturbator as subsequently embarrassed by the exposure (Madanikia, Bartholomew, & Cytrynbaum, 2013). Eve narrates her early childhood masturbation, drawing on this discourse, saying her mother “walked in” while she was masturbating, and she says, “I don’t think I even stopped.” Her laughter following this statement and her use of the word “even” allude to the unexpectedness she seems to be trying to convey; if a person is caught masturbation, she is generally expected to “stop.” But Eve “[saw] no reason to stop” when she was caught, and she explains why by saying, “I was, like, really little and didn’t have any shame about it.”

Eve explains her lack of shame by stressing how young she was at the time (“I was so little,” “I was, like, really little,” and “at that age”) and her lack of knowledge about the name or cultural meanings of her behavior. Participants frequently explained their experiences in terms of their young age at the time, and this may represent their belief that childhood is a time of
innocence (Robinson, 2012). For example, Tina2 (Black/White, Straight, 26), who remembers masturbating around the age of four or five, references innocence explicitly. She says of her earliest experiences of masturbation, “You’re a kid, so you’re so innocent. Kids are so, they have no idea. They’re just exploring. So, yeah, I, um, thought it felt good. That was it. … To me, it was, like, to-, like, not a big deal.” Like Eve, Tina2 explains her lack of shame (“it was … not a big deal”) in terms of being “a kid” and being “so innocent.” Both Eve and Tina2 also seem to associate this innocence with not knowing (Eve: “I was so little, and I didn’t really know what it was;” Tina2: “kids are so, they have no idea”), and this lack of knowledge, as in Kristine’s narrative, appears to have created a cognitive space for “exploring” their bodies and pleasures.

Eve also explains her lack of shame by noting the lack of a psychological connection for her between her masturbatory behavior and the realm of the sexual. Like Kristine, she says that her masturbation “wasn’t even necessarily sexual yet?” and then reconsiders for a moment before saying, “or I guess, if it was [sexual], I wouldn’t have had … any way to connect it to sex?” Both of these statements rise in intonation at the end as if they were questions, suggesting that Eve may be thinking aloud and doing the Memory Work of reconstructing what this experience was like for her at the time and how it may have been connected (or not) to sexuality. She seems satisfied with this explanation of her experience as not yet sexual, and goes on to explain that in this context, she experienced her masturbation as a pleasurable sensation in her body. Rather than “connect[ing] it to sex,” Eve says, “it was just more like touching myself there felt good.” Her use of the phrase “it was just more like” alongside her insistence that she was unaware of the sexual nature of her actions suggests that this embodied sensation that “felt good” was the defining feature of this experience for her.
Similar to Kristine’s experience, Eve’s emphasis on enjoyable bodily sensations without a hint of shame exemplifies Foucault’s (1978) call for “bodies and pleasures” as a possibility for freedom from oppressive discourses. Because these women seem not to have internalized dominant notions such as, for example, that women’s sexual pleasure is potentially dangerous (see Chapter Three; Bartky, 1990; Vance, 1989), they are theoretically unable to resist such discourses, but may instead be free from their regulation. Unlike Fine’s (1988) “missing discourse of desire,” which was theorized as a means to uphold oppression, in the present study, participants’ “missing discourses” seem to play a different role (see also Tuana, 2004); by not knowing what society might think of their behavior, these girls appeared free to playfully explore their bodies and sensations without negative internalized ideas. Though they may not have had a label or means with which to put their experiences into words as children, these experiences were nonetheless memorable (even if reconstructed) and real for participants. Perhaps a lack of knowledge of one sort (i.e., lack of knowledge of oppressive dominant discourses) can create the cognitive space for knowledge of a different sort (i.e., embodied self-awareness or self-discovery).

**Shifting From a Free-Floating and Embodied to a Sexual Understanding of Masturbation**

Like Eve’s understanding that being “caught” masturbating is discursively presumed to be embarrassing, women who began masturbating before they had any discursive knowledge about what their behavior and/or sensations were called or meant eventually did learn these meanings. Some participants described this learning as a sudden realization, while others narrated more gradual processes. In both cases, this shift in understanding usually occurred around puberty or slightly later (as late as high school), and involved participants coming to
understand that the solitary and embodied practice with which they were familiar is generally considered a sexual one. Nadine (White, Queer/Lesbian, 27), for instance, narrates a sudden realization of discursive aspects of her behavior while reading a book about puberty her mother had given her:

> The book is, um, it was a whole book about, like, girls’ health and stuff. Um, and, like, sexuality, and I think she [mom] got it for me when I was, like, maybe twelve or thirteen. Um, and there was, like, a box in it that was, like, “What is masturbation?” And it said what it was, and I was, like, “Oh, that’s what I’ve been doing!” … I didn’t know what it was, and I had never, like, I mean, uh at eleven I wasn’t associating anything with sex, but I hadn’t associated [it] with sex, so yeah, I just didn’t know what I was doing. Um, so seeing that in there was like, “Oh okay, this, like, just a way to label, like, a behavior that, that I’d been doing.”

Like Eve and Kristine, Nadine narrates that she “didn’t know what [she] was doing” during her early childhood masturbation experiences, because these experiences were not yet sexual to her (“I wasn’t associating anything with sex”), and because she was young (“at eleven”). But Nadine also narrates an “aha” moment in which she suddenly connected her previously unnamed behavior (“Oh, that’s what I’ve been doing”) to a name and sexual meaning. In the process of reading the book, she learned that “what [she had] been doing” was called “masturbation,” and her use of the word “oh” twice suggests that this information allowed her to make a new cognitive connection. Critical developmental psychologists (e.g., Erica Burman & Lev Vygotsky) might argue that learning this new language provided Nadine with more than just a word to represent a thought or experience; learning the word “masturbation,” within the context of going through puberty and reading about other sexuality- and puberty-related topics may have
informed the way she was about to think about her experience (e.g., Vygotsky, 1987). Though Nadine says that this new information provided her with “just a way to label … a behavior that [she had] been doing,” the rest of her narration provides clues indicating that she learned more than “just” the “label.” First, by beginning her narrative with a description of the book as about “health and … sexuality,” Nadine’s statement that the book included a section that “said what it [masturbation] was” implies that masturbation was described in the book as a part of healthy sexuality (or perhaps she makes use of a lens of “health” to make talking about this sensitive topic more palatable? [see, for example, McClelland & Fine, 2008a]). Furthermore, her statement that she “wasn’t associating anything with sex” (including, presumably, masturbation) is followed immediately by a statement of not-yet-knowing (“I just didn’t know what I was doing”), which in turn is followed by a statement of her reaction to reading this information; after setting up the context of her learning (i.e., that masturbation wasn’t yet sexual and that she didn’t know what it was), she says, “so seeing that [information about masturbation] in there was like … a way to label” her experience. Nadine’s assertion that she was suddenly able to label her behavior sounds as though she was able to label that behavior – and think about it – both as “masturbation,” and as something sexual.

As was the case for Nadine, moving from an extra-discursive experience of masturbation to a discursive one entails gaining an understanding that pleasurable genital stimulation is generally considered sexual. While some participants, like Nadine, recall a moment of sudden realization, others described a more gradual and embodied learning process. For example, Michele (White, Queer/Bisexual, 27) says:

Really early, like, elementary school, I have, like, vague memories of, um, I don’t know, I guess I was probably, like, like moving in a certain way in bed that, like, rubbed the
clitoris in such a way that I remember feeling like something pleasurable was happening. Um, but had no sense of what it was. I was just like, “Oh, this is nice. Like, this is a good feeling.” Um, and then I also remember when I was, like, in fifth or sixth, probably sixth grade, like, thinking sexy thoughts, which, in my mind at the time, were, like, people kissing. Like, different people in my class that I knew and thought were pretty kissing each other. Like, ooooh! Um, and I remember connecting that to, like, the good feelings, too. But it still wasn’t, like, I still didn’t really know that that’s what it was.

Michele reiterates the experiences of those above in her description of embodied self-discovery during childhood that was both “pleasurable” (also “a good feeling”) and undefined (she “had no sense of what it was”). But Michele also narrates a slow process of becoming more aware of potential connections between her embodied sensations and sexuality. In “fifth or sixth” grade, she says she began “thinking sexy thoughts” such as “people in my class that I knew and thought were pretty kissing each other,” and she “connect[ed] that [the sexy thoughts] to … the good feelings.” As Michele imagined sexy scenes in her mind, she “connect[ed]” the way her body felt in these experiences (“the good feelings”) to the way it felt when she “mov[ed] a certain way in bed.” Michele used the sensations she felt in her body to connect her masturbation to sexuality, even while she concludes her narration by explaining that at the time, she “still didn’t really know that that’s what it was.” It is unclear whether “that” refers to masturbation or embodied sexual feelings, but Michele’s point stands: though she was able to make preliminary connections between the pleasurable sensations she experienced in her body during two separate situations, she still lacked a broader understanding of what her experience was called or meant. Nevertheless, Michele’s narration illuminates an embodied pathway to knowledge in which she
used the sensations she was feeling in her body to draw a connection between two distinct experiences.

Though Michele’s embodied connection-making stops short of a sexual understanding of solitary masturbation, two participants narrated concrete and detailed experiences of using their embodied sensations to connect their masturbation to sexuality. Alexis (Caucasian/White, Straight/Heterosexual, 31), who recalled giving herself orgasms before the age of eleven, narrates an experience that brings together many of the findings I have presented in this chapter:

A: When I was little, like, I, I don’t ever remember, like, it, like orgasms, like, I knew how to give myself an orgasm, and I think it started happening kind of young, and I was, like, “What is this?” I didn’t know what it was, but I, like, I knew it was happening, but I didn’t really know it as masturbation or as, like, I just knew that it, like, felt good … So I, like, I remember sort of, like, knowing what an … orgasm felt like, and knowing that that was, like, something that I could do, like, give myself, but not really knowing what it was or what it was called. And then, maybe, later I found out that it was called masturbation. Or that, that, what I was doing was actually considered masturbation. …

C: Can you remember some of the first times that you masturbated?
A: Um, I don’t remember, like, the first time, but [giggle] I think, so, I, for me, [sigh] well, I remember the f-, like, there were times when I’d be watching movies, and … there were, like, people kissing, and I started feeling a certain way that I, like, wasn’t sure, like, I wasn’t sure about how I f-, I was feeling. So, I, sort of, like, that was, like, my first, sort of, like, being a little kid and sort of, like, being aroused and being, like, what is happening to me, and, and I never talked to anybody about that, but I sort of figured out, like, what was going on. And then, I think, like, masturbating, I was, I was in dance, so
we were always doing lots [giggle], this is embarrassing, lots of sit-ups. And, like, and that was, like, it felt really good sometimes, and then I think that’s sort of how I started doing that. …

C: Did you have an orgasm from, like, the sit-ups and stuff?

A: I did! Uh, yeah, I did, and I didn’t recognize it as that, but I knew that it was, like, I th-, I think pretty quickly I figured out what was happening. But I remember, like, the first few times, I was kind of, like, “That just felt really good,” and then I would, like, do it in my r-, I would do sit-ups in my room … I probably did associate it [the orgasms] with what I had seen on TV, ‘cause I recognized, like, similar feelings, like, physical feelings. Not just, like, “Oh, that’s nice.” But, like, feeling like, aroused and, and, and then also having, like, the orgasms with the sit-ups, but kind of being, like, “Oh, I can make myself feel the way I feel when I’m, like, watching the movies.”

Though much of Alexis’ narrative echoes the sentiments of participants presented above, she also describes her childhood ability to give herself orgasms by doing sit-ups, and she provides a clear roadmap for how she was able to “figure out what was happening.” Like many other participants, Alexis narrates what she knew – that she was able to produce the sensations she felt in her body (“I knew how to give myself an orgasm” and “I just knew that it, like, felt good”) – and what she did not know – what the behavior and the sensation were called or meant (regarding the sensation: “What is this?” regarding the behavior: “I didn’t really know it as masturbation”). Also similar to others, Alexis explains that “later” in her life, she “found out that … what I was doing was actually considered masturbation.” While she at first does not expand on how she “found out,” later in her interview, she describes a process by which she used the sensations she felt in her body to connect her masturbation to sexuality more broadly.
When I ask her about some of the first times she can remember masturbating, Alexis begins her story not by talking about masturbation, but instead by talking about her earliest memories of arousal. In response to “movies” featuring “people kissing,” she “started feeling a certain way,” but as with her sit-up-induced orgasms, she “wasn’t sure about how … I was feeling” (she also wondered “what is happening to me”). She then seems to look back on this experience from her adult standpoint, explaining that it was her “first” experience of “being aroused.” She “never talked to anybody about that,” but she says she was able to “sort of figure out … what was going on,” which suggests that she was beginning to understand that the sensations she was feeling in her body were considered arousal, though she did not yet clarify how she made the connection. After providing this context, Alexis turns to the earliest masturbation experiences she can remember, explaining how “in dance” classes, she did “lots of sit-ups,” which “felt really good sometimes.” Though she had talked earlier in the interview about knowing how to give herself orgasms, she had not explained how she was able to do so, and at this later point in the interview, she does not clarify whether the “really good” feelings she experienced when doing sit-ups were orgasms. Since she had been connecting the good sit-up feelings to masturbation, I wondered whether she was experiencing exercise-induced orgasms (Herbenick & Fortenberry, 2011). When I ask her to clarify if she had orgasms from doing the sit-ups, she exclaims, “I did!” She then quickly reiterates that at the time, she still “didn’t recognize” her experiences as orgasmic, and repeats that “the first few times” she had exercise-induced orgasms, what she “knew” was that the sensations “just felt really good.” Like other participants, Alexis seemed to experience her childhood orgasms as free-floating pleasurable sensations in her body, and those sensations – rather than any sort of internalized discourse –
were the defining features of the experience for her (she, like Eve, used the word “just” to describe the experience).

At this point in her narrative, Alexis begins to explain precisely how she was able to “pretty quickly … figure out what was happening.” She narrates a process by which she connected the embodied sensations she experienced while watching movies/TV to the embodied sensations she experienced while masturbating, and thereby began to recognize the sexual nature of her experiences. She says she “did associate it [the orgasms] with what I had seen on TV, ‘cause [she] recognized … similar … physical feelings.” She clarifies that the “similar feelings” she was referring to were “not just” a matter of the sensations feeling “nice,” but the feelings were specifically sexual in nature; in both instances, she was “feeling … aroused.” She drives this point home by narrating the moment she realized this connection: she said she thought to herself, “Oh, I can make myself feel the way I feel when I’m, like, watching the movies,” suggesting that she was beginning to grasp something that was new to her. Unlike participants who recalled learning the word “masturbation” and connecting that to their embodied experiences, Alexis does not narrate learning the label for her behavior. Instead, similar to Michele, Alexis made use of the sensations she felt in her body to connect one experience to the other, thereby arriving at an understanding of her embodied sensations as sexual.

Importantly, Alexis’ newfound understanding of her behavior as connected to sexuality appears to have felt agentic to her at the time. Like the participants presented above, she does not make reference to oppressive discourses such as those that mandate women’s achievement or that define women’s sexual pleasure as dangerously excessive (see Chapter Three; Bartky, 1990; Burns, Futch & Tolman, 2011; Vance, 1989). Instead, Alexis says that as a child, she knew that orgasms were “something that [she] could do” and also something that she could “give
[her]self.” It sounds as though Alexis felt capable in her abilities (orgasms were “something that I could do”) and also viewed the experiences as generous ones in which she could “give [her]self” a gift that “felt good.” After “the first few times” of giving herself orgasms by doing sit-ups, Alexis sought to replicate the experience (“I would do sit-ups in my room”), which also suggests an autonomous stance to her own embodied pleasure and discovery. Drawing on Foucault (1978), Alexis’ exploratory attention to her body and its pleasures again sound like a moment of freedom from oppressive norms; she listened to what her body had to say, and followed it on a path to self-discovery (Cixous et al., 1976). Even making the connection between the way her body felt during her exercise-induced orgasms and the way it felt while watching kissing scenes in movies seemed to be agentic: she exclaimed, “Oh, I can make myself feel the way I feel when I’m … watching the movies” (my emphasis). Without the constraints of dominant discourses, Alexis narrates a realization that she had the power to create embodied feelings for herself, rather than just noticing “feeling a certain way” after being exposed to “people kissing” on TV.

The narratives in this section illuminate two possible pathways through which girls shift their understanding of their masturbation from an extra-discursive one to one that is connected to sexuality. Some women narrated sudden “aha” moments after exposure to language, and some recognized similar embodied sensations during masturbation and during exposure to thoughts or stimuli that are of a sexual nature. In both cases, learning that masturbation is sexual appears to feel neutral or at least not negative to participants, and seems to be around the same age as the onset of puberty (10-12; see, e.g., Herdt & McClintock, 2000) – a time of burgeoning sexual awareness and subjectivity. Considering the extent to which internalizing dominant discourses seems to contribute to these women’s self-surveillance and negative emotions (see previous
chapter), it might be expected that when girls realize that their masturbatory behavior is sexual, they would feel negatively about it. Indeed, the women who narrated the extra-discursive experiences presented in this chapter were no less likely than other participants to narrate having internalized such discourses later in their lives (see Chapter Three). However, participants narrated the very moment in which they began to understand their masturbation as sexual as feeling relatively unproblematic, or even agentic, to them. Perhaps these first moments of sexual understanding of masturbation are not yet been tinged by the nuances of accompanying sexual discourses about women’s sexuality or about women’s solitary masturbation specifically.

Sexuality in our society is a very complicated terrain full of diverse and often contradictory ideologies (e.g., the expectations of the sexual double standard that young men are socially rewarded for agentic sexual activity but young women are punished [Attwood, 2007; Jackson & Cram, 2003]). These discourses are confusing even to older adolescents and adults (Banker, Kaestle & Allen, 2010; Tolman, Davis & Bowman, 2016), so it is perhaps unsurprising that the very first understanding these participants describe of their masturbation as sexual are not yet informed by the myriad complex norms and ideologies that may have come into play later.

Perhaps recognizing a connection between embodied sensation and cultural representations of sexuality could be an early step toward understanding the sexual nature of masturbation.

The multiple pathways to a sexual understanding of masturbation I have presented here illuminate how learning and knowledge need not be languaged (Frost et al., 2014). Reading about masturbation in a book and making a connection to one’s own experience exemplifies a model of learning in which words, social meanings, and thoughts co-construct one another (Vygotsky, 1987). But because participants rarely indicated that their parents had talked to them about masturbation as children, some were able to make this connection by listening to the
sensations they felt in their bodies, even without the language to name it (Cixous et al., 1976). In the first section of this chapter, I proposed that for some girls, childhood extra-discursive masturbation experiences may be an instantiation of Foucault’s (1978) call to a focus on “bodies and pleasures,” and that a lack of knowledge of oppressive discourses may actually create cognitive space for embodied exploration. The findings in the second section are similar; I suggest that gaining an understanding of one’s behavior as sexual can also occur through attention to one’s body and pleasures. Perhaps, like I presented in the previous section, a lack of discursive knowledge (e.g., of the word “masturbation” or masturbation as sexual) can be productive; it could create the opportunity for embodied learning and knowledge (e.g., using the sensations one feels in the body to connect masturbation to kissing).

Conclusion

The findings I have presented in this chapter suggest that the experiences of masturbation that some women remember having as young children may exist temporarily outside of discourse – they are *extra-discursive*. These women’s narratives of such childhood experiences suggest that at the time, they did not know what their behavior was called or meant in a broader social context, but instead experienced free-floating embodied sensations of pleasure. Participants frequently referenced not having been taught about masturbation as children, which is consistent

I imagine that extra-discursive spaces like the ones presented here could be productive by creating the cognitive space for playful embodied exploration. Perhaps extra-discursive spaces like the ones presented here could be seen in other sorts of embodied awareness as well. For instance, Sara McClelland and colleagues (2016) found that many same-sex attracted women recalled childhood experiences of attraction that they “didn’t really have a word for” and that they did not feel “ashamed of” (p. 1380), and these experiences were also embodied (participants described the sensations of “butterflies” [p. 1381]). Perhaps the women in that study lived their early sexual attractions extra-discursively, which resulted in the cognitive space to enjoy those sensations without shame.
with the extant literature (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Kaestle & Allen, 2011; Watson & McKee, 2013). In a context of negligible discursive knowledge about the behavior, girls often stumbled upon it themselves. Participants narrated this self-discovery in embodied terms, and their first awareness of embodied genital sensation often came as a pleasant surprise. These women also commonly drew on their adult knowledge of sexuality and/or masturbation in order to claim that at the time, that knowledge did not play a role, and instead, the experience was “just something that felt good.” My findings suggest that these embodied feelings of pleasure were not generally sexual at the time, and instead, they seemed to exist wholly outside of any broader discursive understanding. The experiences felt good in the body – full stop.

In reflecting on and narrating such a unique experience – one that is memorable but nevertheless outside of language and discourse – participants frequently struggled to put it into words. Narrations of these extra-discursive childhood experiences were rife with uncertainty and hesitation. There are several possible explanations for this linguistic hedging, including that women felt uncomfortable discussing the intimate details of their childhood embodied pleasure, or that they had difficulty remembering an experience that occurred so early in life and so they did Memory Work to reconstruct their experiences in accordance with their present understandings of themselves (Haug, 2008). Participants may also have found it challenging to narrate an experience that, at the time, they had felt so acutely in their bodies but that they had also lacked language for. This is precisely what Frost and colleagues (2014) would understand as an experience that had “been lived but not yet languaged” (p. 135), and what Cain (1993) would understand as an experience that “pre-exist[ed] its possible utterance” (p. 83). In other words, the early childhood masturbation experiences these women narrated appear to have existed before
they could be named or understood in discursive terms. They were outside of the regulatory power of discourse, and so they represent a brief but important moment of freedom from its grip.

Such experiences complicate Tuana’s (2004) theory of ignorance. In Tuana’s formulation, ignorance is understood as a tool mobilized to uphold oppressive institutions. She might argue, for instance, that not being taught about masturbation as children prevents girls from learning about their own bodies and the types of stimulation they find the most pleasurable, which in turn creates unequal power dynamics in heterosexual partnerships, which in turn maintains the institution of heterosexuality (and Fine’s [1988] “missing discourse” work makes a similar argument). The findings I have presented in this chapter add a new layer of complexity to this theoretical scenario. For the women presented here, childhood ignorance of dominant discourses seemed not to be oppressive, but rather unrestricted and productive. As I suggest above, girls’ lack of knowledge about the stigma associated with masturbation or the complicated and sexist discursive terrain of sexuality may actually have created the cognitive space necessary for playful and unproblematic embodied self-exploration.

Women’s knowledge and lack thereof, then, as I suggest in Chapter Three, must be examined in at least two forms – discursive and embodied – and the relationships between knowing, not-knowing and power may depend on these forms. For example, Dylan may not have had “a name for” her behavior or sensation, but that “missing discourse” did not translate to a lack of embodied knowledge – she was very knowledgeable about what she felt in her body. In this case, it seems that Dylan’s discursive ignorance created space for her embodied knowledge – which included exploring her body and pleasures – which in turn represented a moment of freedom from oppressive discourses. In this way, knowledge and ignorance can each exist in both discursive and embodied forms.
This extra-discursive freedom is inevitably short-lived. Participants frequently narrated a subjective shift in their knowledge and understanding of their masturbation, as they grew older. Whereas in childhood, their experiences were dominated by pleasurable sensations in their bodies, in adolescence, they began to learn what their behavior was called and what it meant – they entered into discourse. Sometimes participants narrated gaining this new knowledge all at once in a moment of surprise (e.g., “Oh, that’s what I’ve been doing!”), and for others the shift was more gradual, but in neither case do participants narrate distress at gaining this knowledge. Instead, if women narrated any emotional response to their newfound understanding, it sounded like calm acceptance or excitement – a willful desire to learn even more. The subjective shift participants narrate entailed a psychological change from experiencing masturbation as a free-floating sensation in one’s body to experiencing masturbation in a sexual way. Once these women gained access to the language and meanings of their experiences, their physically solitary behavior became psychologically enmeshed in discourse. Though they may have been physically alone, their masturbation experiences were social; they imagined others in their minds, and started to recognize their behavior as sexual. Some women seemed to rely on embodied sensation to make this connection, using the feelings in their bodies as a means to connect a previously extra-discursive experience to sexuality. Perhaps the extra-discursive childhood masturbation experiences presented here represent the first step in a long journey to make meaning of one’s solitary masturbation experiences utilizing both embodied and discursive knowledge.
Chapter Five: “It Opened Some Kind of Door for Me”

Solitary Masturbation and the Power of Knowledge, Community and Embodiment
In Chapter Three of this dissertation, I presented multiple ways in which the women in my sample talk about their solitary masturbation experiences that illuminate how the paradoxical experiences of pleasure, shame, and confusion are woven together in service to the maintenance of women’s oppression. These experiences of tension primarily occur early in these women’s masturbatory lives as they first become interested in and begin to explore solitary masturbation (though traces of shame seem to linger throughout their lives). In Chapter Four, I dove deeply into one particular type of early solitary masturbation experience – a childhood extra-discursive one – in which I suggested that when girls have not yet been exposed to dominant discourses regulating their solitary masturbation, they may sometimes experience their self-eroticism free from the mandates of those discourses. The findings I presented in that chapter also suggested that embodied sensation and embodied knowledge could work as tools with which girls construct an understanding of themselves and their sexualities.

But while women’s childhood extra-discursive solitary masturbation experiences represent moments of freedom from oppressive discourses, they do not necessarily represent moments of resistance, because it is theoretically impossible to resist something to which one lacks access (Foucault, 1980). That is, because participants, as children, lacked knowledge of the social discourses that would regulate them, they could not have resisted those discourses; resistance requires awareness. Instead, women who, as children, lacked knowledge of these ideologies experienced brief periods of freedom from the regulation that awareness would have produced (see Chapter Four for more). And while these childhood moments of freedom sounded productive and positive, all participants narrated an eventual awareness and understanding of social norms and discourses that govern women’s solitary masturbation. For instance, Kristine, whose childhood masturbation she described as “really a physical manifestation” that “brings me
pleasure” (see Chapter Four), later asked me whether her preferred masturbation method was “weird” (see Chapter Three), suggesting that she wanted to masturbate in the “right” way (e.g., Frith, 2013). Michele, who masturbated as a child but “had no sense of what it was” (see Chapter Four), at some point “forgot about” masturbating, and when she started again around the age of seventeen, explained that she felt “frustrated” that she “didn’t know how to have an orgasm” (see Chapter Three). This suggests that Michele had been exposed to discourses about orgasms as easy and important to achieve (e.g., Tyler, 2004). And Kristy, who describes her childhood masturbation as a “physical feeling” that she “didn’t know what [it] meant” (see Chapter Four), later tells me that although she has “caught” her husband masturbating, she “would feel embarrassed” if he caught her, and so she “wait[s] until times when [she] know[s] he’s going to be gone” (see Chapter Three). Kristy’s concerns and modified behavior seem to be informed by the dominant discourse that women’s sexuality (but not men’s) is at risk of being excessive, and so should be hidden away (e.g., McClelland & Fine, 2008a).

Though nearly all of the women in my sample expressed exposure to negative messages about women’s masturbation and experienced shame and/or confusion at some point in their lives, by the time I interviewed them, the vast majority explicitly rejected these messages and emotions. While this cognitive and emotional shift is itself a finding, it also raises the question as to how this shift occurs. That is, if, as I have suggested in Chapter Three, women frequently found their early solitary masturbation experiences to be informed by oppressive discourses, I wonder how is it that these women come to question and/or resist these forces. In this final

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26 As I discuss in Chapter Six, this widespread rejection of negative messages and emotions is probably not representative of American women’s attitudes toward solitary masturbation more broadly. The women in my sample were willing to discuss their thoughts and feelings about sexuality and masturbation, and therefore probably hold more liberal sexual attitudes than the general population, a common critique of sexuality research (e.g., Wiederman, 1999).
findings chapter, I first present exemplars of women explicitly rejecting the negative messages they had learned earlier in their lives. After laying this foundation, I explore the aspects of these women’s experiences that can illuminate the means by which they make this shift, and the ways that their new understanding informs their sexualities and their lives.

Explicitly Rejecting Shaming Messages

The majority of women in my sample narrated an explicit rejection of messages they had received (see Chapter Three) that would shame or otherwise regulate women’s solitary masturbation. Though my data suggests that this rejection of negative messages occurred after earlier experiences of shame and/or uncertainty, women narrated coming to this position in various ways and at various times in their lives. Participants rejected messages they had received from religious upbringings as well as negative messages they had received about sexuality from non-religious sources. Alysa (White, Straight, 34) “almost sort of” masturbated once in middle school, but did not really start masturbating until she was “a freshman in college.” She tells me that she is “certain [she] didn’t talk about it with [her] parents” and she is “certain [she] didn’t learn about it from school.” Alysa was raised Catholic, and explained that in Catholicism, masturbation is generally “looked down on.” Though she says she “is not [Catholic] anymore,” she explains that her upbringing may still affect her:

I’m sure there’s just that, like, little twinge of, um, reserved sexuality that’s sort of hanging over me from my upbringing. Um, and then, at some point I just, was no longer a believer, and uh, that was just one of the things where I just said, “You know what? This is nonsense. It’s ancient hooey, and we need to move past it.”
Alysa explicitly rejects the religious notions she had been raised with. She explains that though a “twinge of … reserved sexuality” might “hang over” her even in the present moment, she nevertheless reached a moment in her life (“at some point”) in which she no longer completely accepted that religious conservatism. She says she abandoned her religious beliefs (“I … was no longer a believer”) and decided that the messages she had learned from her religion were “nonsense” and “ancient hooey.” She resolves herself to “move past” these outdated notions, and seems to believe that society should as well (“we need to”). But Alysa’s narrative suggests that despite her surface rejection of these messages of “reserved sexuality,” she is still not entirely free of their pull. She says she is “sure” that a “little twinge” of these messages still “hang over” her, and though she calls the messages “ancient hooey,” she does not say that she has “moved past” them, but that “we need to” (my emphasis). This implies that Alysa may still be in a process of navigating the messages from her upbringing (i.e., that masturbation is “looked down on’’); in any case, she is clear in her desire to reject these ideas.

A few women were more specific about the process by which this rejection of religious messages happened for them. Raisin (Filipino American, Lesbian, 30), as I described in Chapter Three, was raised Christian, and received no information about masturbation from her parents, school, or church. In the context of this silence, Raisin had assumed that masturbation “must be something God doesn’t like,” and also feared that God might be watching her masturbate. Responding to my question about how this felt to her, she says,

At the time, it made me feel, like, like, there’s shame in it, and it’s a little embarrassing, and weird. But, once you get off, you’re just like, “Fuck that.” [laugh] You know? It’s awesome. God had to, like, have created this for a purpose. … Like, once you orgasm, you realize this is a good thing. Like, there’s every cell in your body is like, this is a good
thing. [giggle] You know? … It’s like you really have to commit, that’s what I mean. Like, you have to be, like, “Fuck it. I don’t care if God’s watching. I’m just going to figure this out.”

Raisin walks me through the process of navigating the religious beliefs she had been raised with. While at first, she says she felt bad about masturbating (“it made me feel … like there’s shame in it and it’s a little embarrassing”), it was the experience of first having an orgasm (“once you get off”) that changed her mind: “Fuck that … it’s awesome.” She describes this shift in embodied terms, saying that “every cell in [her] body” told her that masturbating was “a good thing.” But though she begins her narrative speaking in the first person (“it made me feel…”), she later shifts to using the second-person pronoun, “you;” she does not say “every cell in my body” but uses the general “you” both here (“every cell in your body”) and throughout (“once you get off,” “once you orgasm,” “you really have to commit,” etc.). Perhaps she makes this shift to distance herself from the intimate experiences she is narrating, and/or to suggest that hers is a common experience (Freyne, 1991; Yates & Hiles, 2010). Raisin’s laughter and giggling may also suggest that she feels slightly uncomfortable with what she is saying, or recognizes the general social unacceptability of prioritizing her embodied sexual pleasure over what God may think.

In any case, Raisin’s orgasmic embodied experience appears to have led her to modify her relationship to her religious beliefs; she started to believe that “God had to … have created” the orgasm she experienced “for a purpose,” but she does not expand on what she imagines this purpose might be (could it be for pleasure?). It seems that as she talks to me, she is attempting to reconcile the pleasure she felt in her body during this solitary sexual act – an act that she was taught that “God doesn’t like” – with the Christian teaching that everything is created by God (e.g., John 1:3 New International Version). That is, she seems to reason that if God creates
everything, then God created the orgasm she experienced through masturbation, and if this experience feels so “good” and “awesome” “in your body,” then that pleasure must also be “a good thing” and “created … for a purpose.” It is as if she is wondering, *How could something that God created to feel so good also be something God doesn’t like?* In response to this question, she initially decides that “God had to … have created this for a purpose,” effectively reconciling her orgasmic masturbation experience with her religious beliefs.

But later in her narrative, she appears to take a different approach: instead of constructing her experience as one that God logically must approve of (because God created it), she constructs it as one that God may very well not like, but one that she will continue to strive for anyway. She says, again using the general “you,” that she had to “really commit” and think to herself, “Fuck it. I don’t care if God’s watching.” These statements are a departure from her earlier reasoning; if God created her orgasms “for a purpose” (and the sensation is a “good thing”) then why would Raisin need to think about whether God is watching? Why would she need to put effort into “commit[ting]” herself to her masturbation and ignoring the idea that God might be watching (“Fuck it. I don’t care”)? It seems as though Raisin is engaged in an unresolved internal dilemma in which she is trying to reconcile the embodied pleasure she experiences masturbating with what she understands about God.

Though she contradicts herself and seems to still be working out her understanding of her masturbation in the context of her religion, Raisin nevertheless seems to see her embodied pleasure as the axis around which the rest of her logic spins. She rejects the notion that “there’s shame in” masturbating by referencing orgasms: “once you get off, you’re just like, ‘Fuck that.’” In navigating the dilemma of how God and masturbatory orgasms might relate to each other, Raisin insists on the goodness of her orgasms, and repositions God and her relationship with God.
around this internal truth; either God approves (“God had to … have created this for a purpose”), or God does not approve (masturbation “must be something God doesn’t like” and “Fuck it. I don’t care”), but either way, Raisin will continue to give herself orgasms. In fact, the last statement of her narrative suggests that not only will Raisin continue to seek orgasms, but that she is curious about learning more (“I’m just going to figure this out”). Despite Raisin’s continued contemplation, she narrates a rejection of the notion that her self-pleasure could be bad, and instead willfully resolves herself to keep exploring.

While Alysa and Raisin reject the negative messages associated with their religions, other women rejected secular shaming messages. Like Alysa, Ashley (White, Straight, 29) started masturbating as a freshman in college, and tells me (see also Chapter Three) that she “never had any positive messages about [masturbation] growing up.” Instead, she says that she thinks the overall messages women and girls receive about masturbation in our society are “negative” and these messages tell girls and women that they “should be ashamed.” When I ask her what she thinks about that today, she says,

I think it’s terrible. [laugh] I think, um [3 second pause] I feel like I would’ve had a different, I don’t know. I could have learned about myself earlier if I knew that, like, it’s okay. It’s not a big deal, like, you’re not going to die. [laugh] … It just sucks. It’s stupid that, you know, I don’t know, it, it’s not hurting anyone. [laugh] It’s not doing any-, it’s not a bad thing.

Like Alysa and Raisin, Ashley explicitly rejects the shaming messages she perceives in society (though she may not have subscribed to those messages herself), and believes that beyond masturbation just not being bad, it is also a positive force. Ashley says that society’s shaming messages are “terrible” and “stupid,” suggesting that she thinks the messages are not only bad,
but also illogical. She explains why she feels this way by saying that a person who is
masturbating is not dangerous to themselves (“you’re not going to die”) or others (“it’s not
hurting anyone”), and, contrary to negative societal messages, she concludes that masturbation is
“not a big deal” and “not a bad thing.” But Ashley, like Raisin, also hints at the ways that
masturbation can do good in a person’s life. Ashley suspects that she “could have learned about
[her]self earlier” if she had been exposed to messages that masturbation is “okay” (more on this
below). It is unclear whether her use of “myself” refers to learning about her body, her sexuality,
and/or her identity, but in any case, Ashley narrates having felt a sense of fear or apprehension
about masturbating (thinking something bad might happen like dying, which sounds like an
exaggeration to make her point, but historically, this notion is not without precedent), and seems
to wish she had not felt that way. In Ashley’s narrative that I presented in Chapter Three, she
says that during her first masturbation experience, she “thought something bad would happen,”
which supports this interpretation. Her narrative is filled with pauses, laughter, and fits and starts
(e.g., “I think,” “I feel like,” “I don’t know,” “like,” and “you know”). Perhaps, like Raisin, she
is thinking aloud about her stance on the negative messages and is struggling to put into words
how they affected her and why she disagrees with them. Her laughter throughout the narrative
presented could indicate that she thinks these negative messages are ridiculous – she laughs after
saying, “you’re not going to die” and “it’s not hurting anyone.”

Alysa, Raisin, and Ashley – like nearly all of the women in my sample – explicitly reject
negative messages about women’s solitary masturbation, even if they are still in the process of
navigating those messages. Most of these same women had experienced some sort of shame,
confusion, or silencing earlier in their lives (as evidenced in Chapter Three). This shift in
participants’ emotions and attitudes toward masturbation made me wonder how it is that these
women come to question and/or resist the negativity they often experience earlier in their lives. That is, throughout the remainder of this chapter, I examine what aspects of these women’s life experiences, willful subjectivities (Ahmed, 2014), and masturbation experiences can shed light on the means by which women make this shift. Besides just coming to a place in which they reject shaming messages, I wonder what the implications of this process may be both in terms of their sexual lives and their lives more broadly.

I was able to identify two overarching ways (albeit with many sub-themes and intricacies) in which the women in my sample appear to shift from feelings of shame and/or confusion to a questioning and/or rejection of these emotions: 1) They learn new information both independently and socially; and 2) They listen to their embodied sensations. Beyond simply rejecting negative messages, I also explore throughout this chapter the ways these women report that these mechanisms affected them, including newfound feelings of clarity, confidence, normalcy, openness, joviality, pride, control, entitlement, and power.

Learning New Information

A very common theme I detected in participants’ narratives was the experience of learning more about masturbation either by actively seeking out information independently or by being exposed to new information more passively in social situations. In both cases, this newly acquired knowledge seemed to help these women resolve their confusion about and/or reject negative ideas about masturbation.

Independent learning. Some women narrated experiences of curiosity in which they independently sought out new information about masturbation. Amelia (Black/African American, Straight, 26), who began masturbating as a freshman in college, tells me that prior to
that, she “knew it was a thing” but she “didn’t know the mechanics of it.” She says she sought out pornography to learn this missing piece of information:

I was like, “Oh, okay, so that’s like, that’s how women masturbate.” Of like, like, different, like, hand motions and, like, using, uh [giggle] I remember in Sex and the City, um, Samantha, like, brought out her vibrator, which was, like, the big wand, and I was just, like, “How would you use that?” [laugh] and actually watching porn, and, like, “Oh! That’s [giggle] like, it’s not for insertion. [giggle] That makes a lot more sense.” Um, so, like, porn sort of taught me, like, how to do it?

Amelia narrates a process in which she shifts from confusion to understanding by independently seeking out new information. She says she “didn’t know the mechanics” of how a woman would masturbate, and was baffled by the “big wand” vibrator that was utilized by a character in Sex and the City (“How would you use that?”). After watching pornography, Amelia realized that this type of vibrator is “not for insertion,” and she narrates surprise at this discovery (“Oh!”). In Chapter Three, I presented a narrative in which Amelia assumed during her first masturbation experience that she should penetrate herself (“I think I tried … to insert my fingers, like, way too soon. And I was like, that hurt”). Her presumption that women’s masturbation generally includes penetration is evident in the narrative presented here as well (and supports findings in the extant literature [Fahs & Frank, 2014]). When she sees Samantha’s vibrator, she seems unable to imagine how such a device could be used, because it appears impossible to penetrate oneself with. While she is clear that she learned from pornography that the wand vibrator is “not for insertion” (my emphasis) Amelia never actually references what the wand is for – stimulating the clitoris – and her penetrative focus reflects the (hetero)sexist notion that women’s sexual satisfaction depends primarily on penetration (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Rich, 1980).
Nevertheless, Amelia is able to find representations in pornography of clitoral stimulation using a wand vibrator (“Oh! That’s … not for insertion.”). Though she does not mention race in her discussion of watching pornography and *Sex and the City* (perhaps because she was talking to me, a white woman), I wonder whether it played a role. What might it have meant to Amelia, a Black woman, to watch the character Samantha (on *Sex and the City*), a white woman, use a vibrator, and not understand what she was seeing? When Amelia searched for pornography to answer her questions, was she able to find representations of Black women masturbating?

Though I could find no systematic or peer-reviewed analyses of percentages of racial representations in pornography, a data journalist named Jon Millward (2013) conducted an analysis of 10,000 pornography performers based on profiles in the Internet Adult Film Database, and found that only 14% of the performers were Black. When I went onto the popular pornography website, *Pornhub* (visited August, 2016), and searched for “vibrator masturbation,” I saw no representations of Black women until the third page of search results (20 results per page). Given the apparent underrepresentation of Black women in pornography, Amelia may have learned about wand vibrators primarily through representations of white women using them. And considering the extent to which Black women’s sexualities are constructed as pathological in the U.S. (Collins, 2000, 2005; Stephens & Phillips, 2003), Amelia’s learning experience – through the lens of white women’s sexuality – could have felt somewhat distant from her own sexual experiences. Perhaps this racialized power imbalance could explain why Amelia uses a passive voice to describe learning from pornography; she says, “porn sort of taught me … how to do it,” rather than saying, for example, “I learned how to do it from watching porn.” Because Amelia does not bring race into our conversation, I can only use critical theory to speculate as to the role it may have played in her experiences.
But Jennifer Nash (2014), in her analysis of representations of Black women in pornography, provides a useful framework for examining Amelia’s experience from a more positive perspective. Nash advocates a method of analysis that looks beyond “evidence of the wound,” and instead explores ecstasy, which she defines as “the possibilities of female pleasures within a phallic economy and … the possibilities of black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy” (p. 2). While my interpretations above of Amelia’s passive voice and penetrative focus are examples of finding “evidence of the wound,” there is much in her interview that points to ecstasy as well. For instance, later in her discussion of pornography, she tells me that though she did use the visual information of pornography to learn about how to use a wand vibrator, for arousal purposes, she prefers “listening to it” and says she “really always liked the moaning.” Perhaps in a context of what Nash calls “a white-dominated representational economy,” Amelia found a way to explore ecstasy on her own terms – she blocked out the visual representations and focused instead on the auditory ones. By creating a possibility for herself in which the erotic information she was receiving could more closely reflect her experience as a Black woman, Amelia may have found a road to ecstasy.

Additionally, Amelia’s road to ecstasy could have been related to her agency in seeking out the information she needed. After looking to pornography, Amelia says she better understood “how women masturbate,” and the methods she observed in pornography made “a lot more sense” to her than her original presumption that masturbation should be penetrative. Seeing as though the vast majority of women prefer to masturbate by stimulating their clitorises (Davis, Blank, Lin, & Bonillas, 1996; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Leff & Israel, 1983), Amelia’s newfound knowledge about clitoral stimulation may have provided her with a tool to use in her own self-pleasuring. In this way, Amelia seems to go from confusion to clarity by seeking out new
information, and though she does not say so directly, she implies that the resolving of this confusion itself could also have been a moment of ecstasy for her (“Oh! … That makes a lot more sense”).

While some women turned to pornography for more information, others turned to books. For example, Sally (Haitian American [Black], Heterosexual, 33), who enjoyed masturbating with the showerhead so much that she worried she might be addicted to it (see Chapter Three), found that this preferred method was harder to accomplish once she went to college and lived in a dorm (“There’s no showerhead. I’m at school. This is problematic!”). She tells me a story about buying a book to try to solve this dilemma for herself:

S: I had been, like, masturbating since I was, like, fifteen, so, but like, I wanted to know other ways that you could do it, um, because I had, like, fixated on, like, a specific way of doing it. Um, [giggle] um, so I think sophomore year, I picked up a book. And then I was, like, it was called *Hot Sex*. So, I remember that book. I, I still own that book. And then, I read the, it just broke down the mechanics of doing it, like, from r-, A to C: Masturbating or sex?

S: All, everything, and, like, breaking it down, and there was, like, a whole chapter on, like, sex, like, just using your imagination and, like, your fingers, and just, like, going to town.

C: Mm hmm. Wait, on sex? Or-

S: On masturbation.

C: On masturbation. Got it.

S: And there was, like, a whole chapter, and I was, like, “What? You, I didn’t know!” So, I’m reading this book, and I was, like, trying out the techniques, and then, I was like,
“This book is amazing. It’s like a manual.” So, I started, actually, giving it to my friends. I bought four copies, and I gave them to all my closest friends in college. Um, who are still my best friends, to this day, they, um, still have the book. And that book was, like, my first, like, for real introduction, I would say, of like, masturbating in another way. And, also, that masturbating is completely normal, and what you should be doing whenever you want. [giggle] So, that was the first time I felt, like, validated. Like, “This is normal. There’s books about this! There’s a whole two chapters on this!”

Like Amelia, Sally found herself in a position of needing more information about masturbation and sought that information out independently. She says that she had “fixated on” her preferred method of masturbating with the showerhead, but “wanted to know other ways that you could do it.” She “picked up a book” that she says described in detail (“broke down”) aspects of masturbation including fantasy (“using your imagination”) and methods of masturbation (“the mechanics of doing it,” “the techniques”). On three separate occasions in this narrative, Sally notes that “there was … a whole chapter” or “a whole two chapters” on masturbation, suggesting that she found this level of dedicated focus to be surprising and exciting. She says the book was “like a manual,” providing her with new information (“I didn’t know!”), and she was thrilled (“This book is amazing”) to learn exactly the information she had been seeking – how to “masturbate in another way.” In addition to learning this new piece of information, Sally says she also felt “validated” by reading the book. Because the book, an outside authority, presented masturbation as “completely normal” and as something “you should be doing whenever you want” (and because “There’s books about this! There’s a whole two chapters on this!”), Sally says that for “the first time,” she thought, “this is normal.” Similar to Amelia, Sally walks me through the process by which she moves from ignorance to knowledge, and this process is a
willful and agentic one. She is aware of what she wants to know, seeks out resources to fill the
gaps in her knowledge, and is very satisfied with what she learns.

But beyond narrating the means by which she arrived at this new place of understanding
(as Amelia does), Sally also describes an outcome of this journey – she feels “validated” and that
her behavior has been normalized. And perhaps even more indicative of her shift to a normalized
framework is her apparent enthusiasm about sharing her newfound knowledge with her friends.
After recognizing that the book was “amazing,” she “bought four copies, and [she] gave them to
all [her] closest friends.” In this way, Sally’s independent knowledge seeking seemed to help her
to feel that masturbation was not just “normal,” but also “what you should be doing whenever
you want,” and in turn, she is inspired to share this “amazing” book with “all [her] closest
friends.” Considering Sally’s fears earlier in her life that her masturbation might be out of control
(“Am I addicted?” see Chapter Three), and particularly within a context of stereotypical
assumptions of Black women as sexually insatiable and wild (Collins, 2000, 2005; Stephens &
Phillips, 2003), Sally’s outward expressions of excitement about her sexuality are striking. The
validation she experiences from seeking out new knowledge seems to provide her with the
confidence to reject her concerns about her sexuality being “too much” (see Chapter Three), to
embrace her masturbation as “completely normal,” and to help those she cares about to
experience this liberation too (more on social learning below).

**Social learning.** In addition to seeking out information independently, many women
reported learning new information about masturbation in social settings. For instance, several
women told stories of learning about masturbation from visiting sex shops or attending sex toy
parties. Alice (Black/Asian, Heterosexual, 29) tells me that growing up, she did not learn about
masturbation from her parents (“No”), her school (“I don’t really think I learned about it in
school that much”), or her friends (“No!”), but that she did see some “scrambled porn” on TV. She began masturbating around the age of twelve after seeing some “soft-core porn on HBO,” and continued masturbating “maybe once every couple months” after that, even though she worried at the time that she “probably wasn’t supposed to be doing it.” In college, Alice tells me that when she and her friends were “just so bored,” they would sometimes go to sex shops together:

There were several occasions where we would go, and we would buy, like, a new dildo or a new vibrator. As like, as a fun trip. That’s good, well it is fun, because then you’re just walking around, like, “What is this? Why have I never seen this before? What does this do? What material is this made of? Like, what is going on?” … It was, like, “Oh my God, what does this do? What, like, let me feel it on my skin, this vibration.”

Alice narrates an experience of playful curiosity and exploration with friends. Her narrative is filled with the questions she and her friends asked as they “walk[ed] around” the shop: “What is this?” “What does this do?” “What material is this made of?” There also appear to be embodied components to this experience – the group of friends wondered “what material” various toys were made of and also wanted to “feel [this vibration] on [their] skin.” While Alice describes this trip as something that she and her friends did without a real purpose in mind (they were “just so bored”), I wonder whether it was really so aimless. Perhaps Alice tells her story in this way because social norms – particularly for women of color – dictate that women should not be excessively sexual (Collins, 2000; McClelland & Fine, 2008a); perhaps she worried that I, a white woman, might apply these stereotypes to her. By constructing her experience as something that just happened rather than as something purposeful and potentially full of desire, I wonder
whether Alice might have been trying to avoid such a mischaracterization (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002).

In any case, Alice describes the trips to the sex shops with her friends as “fun” and exploratory. Though her narrative is filled with questions, it sounds very different from the disheartened tone of the narratives of confusion I presented in Chapter Three. Instead of questions about whether masturbation is acceptable (e.g., Ashley2: “Is it something that I’m not supposed to be doing?”) and whether one’s masturbation experiences are the “right” ones (e.g., Jessica: “I’m not sure if this is how it’s supposed to feel”), Alice and her friends ask questions of playful curiosity (“What does this do? What material is this made of?”), indignation (“Why have I never seen this before?”), and embodiment (“Let me feel it on my skin, this vibration”). Perhaps going to sex shops with friends has a normalizing affect similar to the one Sally described when she read a book with “a whole two chapters” on masturbation. If masturbation is common enough that people write chapters about it and sell toys in stores for it, then maybe it is not so shameful after all.

While some women went to sex shops in groups and learned more about masturbation that way, others chatted with friends. Kimberly (Caucasian, Straight/Hetero, 29) tells me that hers was “not a very good childhood” because she grew up in a home in which “there was, like, violence” (she clarifies that “nobody, as far as I know, was sexually abused”); she says “it wasn’t like a safe space where we went and, like, openly talked about, like, anything.” Aside from not learning about masturbation at home, she also did not learn about it in school (“definitely not”), except for “kids kind of joking with each other” about it, but “only the guys.” She began masturbating when she was about eight years old, but started masturbating “with the intent to have an orgasm or pleasure myself” in high school (she does not say where she got this goal).
Though she says she had “always been curious about other people’s sex lives,” she did not discuss masturbation with other people until “probably [her] senior year of college.” I ask Kimberly what sorts of things she would talk about with her friends, and she says,

Usually, just, like, “How often do you do it?” Like, that, you know, comparing notes, or whatever. Um, “Do you always orgasm or not?” Uh, “Do you,” I definitely did the, like, “Do you masturbate in front of your boyfriend or girlfriend?” Um, and kind of like that, things like that. It was just, like, a lot of questions. [laugh] Once we opened the door, it was, like, a free-for-all. [laugh] It was fun. I liked it.

Kimberly says that “comparing notes” about masturbation with her friends was a positive experience for her. Like Alice, Kimberly says that she and her friends had “a lot of questions,” but instead of being curious about sex toys, Kimberly and her friends talked about other aspects of masturbation such as frequency (“How often do you do it?”), orgasms (“Do you always orgasm or not?”), and partner issues (“Do you masturbate in front of your boyfriend or girlfriend?”). This latter concern sounds like it may have been the most important of the three to Kimberly, since she says she “definitely” asked about it. Perhaps, like participants presented in Chapter Three, Kimberly thinks of masturbation as an aspect of her sexuality, and is interested in the ways in which masturbation could be a component of her partnered sexual experiences. But beyond incorporating masturbation into partnered sexual encounters, Kimberly’s question about masturbating “in front of” a partner, rather than, for example, with a partner, sounds as if she is asking about performing or at least about sharing an intimate side of herself with a partner. *Should I feel all right about showing my partner this side of my sexuality?* Perhaps with this question, Kimberly is really asking her friends whether they find it acceptable to masturbate in front of an intimate partner, or whether solitary masturbation falls outside of the scope of
acceptable partnered sexual behaviors. Though she does not tell me her friends’ responses, she does seem to have found their conversations helpful and enjoyable. She says that after she and her friends started talking about their masturbation experiences (“once we opened the door”), “it was … a free-for-all” and “fun.” Though many years separated Kimberly’s first masturbation experiences and her first experiences talking about it with others, she seems to have relished the opportunity for open discussion; she finishes her narrative by saying, “I liked it.”

Beyond simply “open[ing] the door” for more discussion (and enjoying these discussions), many women explained how talking to their friends began to normalize masturbation for them. For instance, Asha (South Asian/White, Bi/Pansexual, 30), who told me earlier in her interview that she had been afraid to orgasm during masturbation because she “thought that it was something [she] should save to do with … someone [she] cared about” (see Chapter Three), tells me that by high school, she had let go of this notion (“I didn’t hold on to that idea beyond, like, the age of, like, twelve”), and had started talking with her friends about masturbation:

In high school I definitely had friends who would talk about, “Oh, you should totally buy a vibrator. I got one, and it’s amazing.” Or, “Have you tried the showerhead, or” [laugh] um, like, um, different things that they did, like, uh, I remember one girl saying, “If I cross my legs right before I have an orgasm, it makes it so much better. You should try that.” So it was definitely, like, tip sharing, I guess. … It definitely felt like a bonding thing, and it, um, I guess it sort of made me feel more normal, or something. I kind of got the feeling of, like, um, n-, there, there was such variety in what my friends’ experiences were, that I didn’t feel like there was anything I would be doing that would be, ab-, abnormal or wrong or something.
Asha echoes both Alice and Kimberly in her curious questioning. But beyond discussing methods of masturbation (“you should totally buy a vibrator” and “have you tried the showerhead”), or other types of “tip sharing,” Asha’s friends also discuss the fruits of these labors – embodied pleasures, and how to explore them. While Kimberly asked her friends about whether they “always orgasm,” Asha’s conversations sound a little more practical and specific. The suggestions provided by Asha’s friends include both physical tools such as “a vibrator” and “the showerhead” and also embodied movements such as “cross[ing] my legs right before I have an orgasm.” These “tips” resist the vagueness that often comprises uncomfortable conversations – there is no hint of sheepish whisperings about what to do with one’s “down there,” for example. These suggestions are concrete, agentic (her friends fully own their participation in these actions by using “I” to describe them: “I got [a vibrator]” and “if I cross my legs…”), proscriptive (the friends unabashedly tell Asha, “you should” twice), and embodied (one friend describes the vibrator as “amazing” and another discusses how she “makes” her orgasm “so much better”). Alongside gaining new knowledge from talking to her friends, Asha also tells me how this learning affected her. She says that these conversations were “a bonding thing” for her group of friends, and that learning that “there was such variety in what [her] friends’ experiences were,” “made [her] feel more normal.” Reminiscent of feminist consciousness-raising groups and masturbation workshops of the 1970s (Barbach, 1974; Dodson, 1996; Weitz, 1982), Asha says she was able to learn that people’s masturbation preferences are diverse (“such variety”) and perhaps began to realize that any conception of “normal” with regards to masturbation should be relatively broad – she says, “I didn’t feel like there was anything I would be doing that would be … abnormal or wrong.” In this way, Asha seems to expand her conceptualization of what
masturbation is and can be – her masturbation imaginary as it were – so as to feel less isolated and more secure in her own practices.

Some women describe this normalizing process in even more detail than Asha. Tina (Asian, Straight, 28) says that she did not learn about masturbation from her parents or friends (“nothing, definitely, from my parents or friends”). However, she tells me that she “grew up Catholic,” and “was in Catholic school from first grade up until twelfth grade,” and that it was in this context that she learned that masturbation is “frowned upon” and is “not something you should do.” Tina started masturbating when she was “twelve or thirteen,” but it was not until “the last year or two” that she began discussing masturbation with friends “mainly because other friends would talk about it.” Explaining how she felt about these new conversations, she says,

I’m like, “Oh.” Like, “Oh. I guess other people do this, too.” Like, I had no idea and, like, all this time, like, I wasn’t sure, like for a very long time, I wasn’t, I just felt like weird about it. Um, like “I don’t know if this is something I shouldn’t be doing,” or, because, like, I wasn’t told, like, or knew anything about it from family, friends and whatnot. … And then I started to feel like, “Oh, this is, like, a normal thing.” At first, first I was, like, “Oh, like, what are you talking about? I wouldn’t do that,” or something. But, yeah, definitely in the last year or two, when friends started to, like, be more open about it and talking about it and, um, talking about their own experiences with masturbation or whatever, then I was like, “Oh. Okay. This is cool, then.”

Like Asha, Tina narrates coming to see her solitary masturbation as “normal” through a process of talking about it with friends. Similar to the confusion and insecurity narrated by participants presented in Chapter Three, Tina says that “for a very long time” she “wasn’t sure” if masturbating was “something [she] shouldn’t be doing” – she felt “weird about it.” Also echoing
earlier narratives, she explains that this confusion stems from (“because”) the silence and ignorance that had surrounded the topic when she was growing up (“I wasn’t told, like, or knew anything about it from family, friends and whatnot.”). She expresses learning with relative awe (she says “oh” four times) that “other people do this too” and that “this is … a normal thing.” She says that this process was not entirely straightforward, and that she struggled to admit that she masturbated. She “at first” responded to her friends’ openness by feigning ignorance (“Oh, like, what are you talking about?”) and denying her own masturbation (“I wouldn’t do that.”), suggesting that the messages she had received growing up about masturbation (it was “not something you should do”) may still have played a role in her thinking. Perhaps she also feared fulfilling the stereotype of Asian women in the U.S. as overly exotic and hypersexual (Shimizu, 2007). But more recently, Asha says her friends’ discussions of “their own experiences with masturbation” have helped her to believe that masturbation is common (“I guess other people do this, too”), socially acceptable (“Okay. This is cool, then.”), and “normal.”

This normalization again harkens to the consciousness-raising groups and masturbation workshops of the 1970s, in which women had the space to learn how to masturbate, talk with one another about their experiences, support each other in their self-explorations, and normalize both the experience of struggling to achieve orgasm and the experience of masturbating more broadly (Barbach, 1974; Dodson, 1996; Weitz, 1982). However, as with much knowledge about women’s sexuality, the notion that women’s masturbation is widespread (and that talking about masturbation with friends can be a liberating experience) seems to remain constantly below the surface of public discourse as an epistemology of ignorance (Tuana, 2004). Unlike the possibility of an extra-discursive not-yet-knowing that could produce the a cognitive space free from discursive regulation (see Chapter Four), the references participants in this chapter make to the
cultural production of ignorance about women’s masturbation harken to Fine’s (1988) “missing discourse of desire,” and suggest that the “missing discourse” of masturbation, for these women, is a similar site of oppression. The cultural knowledge that women’s masturbation is common does occasionally enter public conversation in the form of a new study or a titillating anecdote, but society seems to have a short collective memory; each time the normalcy and empowerment potential of masturbation is elevated to the level of public recognition, it seems to “arriv[e] on the cultural scene as news” (Jagose, 2010, p. 528), before quickly disappearing again beneath the surface, sometimes by way of direct regulative action (e.g., the Joycelyn Elders incident, see Chapter One and Jehl, 1994). In such a social context, it is perhaps unsurprising that so many women in my sample felt isolated and confused in their early masturbation experiences, and then were surprised to learn later in their lives that their desires and practices were widely embraced by other women.

In the face of such silencing and shame, the very fact that women do talk to each other is somewhat surprising. So far in this chapter, I have suggested that some women may come to a place of communication with other women by seeking out information for themselves (like Amelia and Sally), and by exposure to friends’ talk about masturbation, even if a woman herself seems not to have been quite ready to talk (e.g., Tina at first denies her masturbation when her friends talk about it, but eventually finds the topic more acceptable). In general, these conversations appear to happen only with the closest and most trusted of peers, suggesting that even though women are talking to one another, they still do so mostly in private. Nevertheless, when these women’s masturbation talk serves the purpose of normalizing it, an interpersonal dynamic is once again revealed. As I suggested in Chapter Three, even in the case of a physically solitary sexual experience, interpersonal and social dynamics are often at play, such as in cases
of women presuming they should masturbate with penetration, or that orgasms must be achieved in masturbation as a means to improve partnered sexual encounters. In the cases of women normalizing masturbation for one another by talking about it together, a slightly different interpersonal dynamic is at play: women use the information and norms they glean from their closest peers to make sense of their own masturbation experiences. That is, once they have talked to others about masturbation, their own masturbation seems to feel different to them – as Tina says in reference to her masturbation after talking to friends, “Oh. Okay. This is cool then.”

Once masturbation has been normalized via the means I have discussed so far (and I suggest additional mechanisms below), many women describe social scenarios that might have been impossible before. For instance, Amy Today (African American, Lesbian, 41), who had been raised in a “super-duper religious” household and was taught in church that masturbation was “bad or, like, you don’t have any control over yourself” (see Chapter Three), tells me that “as an adult,” she and her friends “are free … we talk about whatever you want to talk about.” After she gives an example of joking with her friends about anal sex play, I ask her whether talking about masturbation is different than talking about other sex-related topics (other participants had told me this). She says,

Nope. Mm mm [indicating no]. My friends, like, if, “What’d you do last night?” “Oh, I, I played with myself and went to sleep.” “Oh, all right.” You know. “You all right? You good? All right.” That’s it. You know, we don’t, it’s not a big deal. It’s a part of it. It’s a part of, you know. It’s cool.

Without uttering the word “normal,” Amy Today describes a hypothetical scenario of talking to friends in which solitary masturbation appears completely normalized. It is somewhat unclear which friend Amy Today is in the dialogue of her story, but the point she is trying to make stands
– talking about masturbation is “not a big deal.” When one friend inquires about what another one did the night prior (“What’d you do last night?”) the second friend instantly responds with a masturbation story – “I played with myself and went to sleep.” In a social context in which talking openly about masturbation is generally considered taboo, such a bold statement about one’s own masturbation practices sounds shocking and brave. But Amy’s friends react without skipping a beat – “Oh, all right.” – and seem to even check in on how the experience was (“You good? All right.”). Like participants in Chapter Three (including Amy herself), Amy seems to view masturbation as an aspect of sexuality (“it’s a part of it” – the second “it” here sounds as if it is in reference to my question about sex-related topics), and sees no reason why her friends should not talk about masturbation as openly as they joke about anal sex play. However, since she sees conversations about masturbation as similar to jokes about anal sex, perhaps these particular conversations are less about sharing information (as was the case for Kimberly, Asha, and Tina), and more about making light of the taboo nature of masturbation. For Amy Today and her friends, talking about masturbation appears to be nonchalant and “cool.”

While Amy Today’s conversations sound nonchalant and possibly jokey, several women told stories of talking about masturbation with friends in ways that were utterly hilarious. They told me stories of silliness and laughter that stood in stark contrast to the stories of shame and confusion that were so common earlier in their lives. While these stories of lighthearted joking are as diverse as the women telling them, Amelia’s narrative serves as a relatively representative exemplar. Though Amelia (Black/African American, Straight, 26) says that she talked very briefly with friends in college about masturbation (see Chapter Three), she tells me that it was not until she made friends that were not “connected to, like, high school or college” that she started talking to friends more. As an example, she tells me a story about sharing a funny
moment with a coworker. She had ordered a new vibrator online and had it shipped to her work because she “spend[s] a lot of time at work.” She continues:

[The] box that [giggle] comes that says uh, [giggle] “Shipped from the Internet to make you happy.” And I opened it, and it was a new vibrator. [laugh] So, I just had to, like, go into my friend’s office and be, like, “Okay, real quick. [laugh] I ordered this vibrator, and it came to work. It’s in this box that says,” [laugh] So like, sort of talking with someone like that. I’ve sort of, like, just like, funny, quick, and, because it was, like, this, like, this is funny. This is ridiculous. [laugh] Um, so, like, having, so, like, being able to, like, have that conversation with them without, like, being, like, “Oh I can’t mention that I own a vibrator.” [laugh]

Amelia’s narrative of sharing a funny experience with a friend at work echoes the nonchalant attitude Amy Today and her friends seem to have toward solitary masturbation. Amelia recognizes a humorous connection between what is written on the box that is delivered to her workplace – “Shipped from the Internet to make you happy” – and the contents of that box – “a new vibrator.” While the boxes with this phrase printed on them presumably deliver any number of different items, the phrase takes on a particular and “ridiculous” meaning when it refers to a sex toy, and particularly when it is delivered to her at work. Amelia laughs throughout her narration of this story, seeming to find the memory nearly as funny in the present moment as it was at the time, or perhaps feeling slightly embarrassed in her retelling. After recognizing the joke at the time, she says she “just had to” share it with her friend. Letting her friend in on the joke sounds easy and casual (echoing Amy Today) – she says it was “just like, funny, quick.” She also seems to recognize the unexpectedness of this sort of silliness when she juxtaposes her response (i.e., letting a friend in on the joke) to a hypothetical, more conservative and regulated
one (i.e., “Oh I can’t mention that I own a vibrator.”). She also notes that her response reflects an ability of hers (“being able to”) that may be somewhat new, considering that she very rarely discussed masturbation with friends until relatively recently. Particularly as a Black woman, Amelia’s confidence in sharing this humorous situation with a friend (she does not mention the race of her friend) suggests that she feels comfortable enough in her own sexual desires and agentic self-eroticism to talk and joke openly about a vibrator, despite whatever awareness she may have of the stereotypes about Black women’s pathological sexuality. By embracing her sexuality openly and with a light heart, Amelia (and Amy Today as well) resists the sexist and racist dominant discourses that work to oppress her. Though such discourses may always inform Amelia’s experiences (as Foucault [1977, 1978] suggests) her story reflects an agentic and willfully carefree attitude toward solitary masturbation that sounds very different from the more negative emotions she narrates having experienced earlier in her life.

These stories of ease and silliness constitute some positive outcomes of having shifted from negative or shaming attitudes toward solitary masturbation to more positive ones. The hesitant but insistent questioning of participants like Alice and Kimberly represent moments of resistance to the overwhelming social silence surrounding women’s masturbation. Like the women who participated in the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, the women presented above do not keep quiet – they are willful subjects (Ahmed, 2014). They report beginning to talk to friends at various times in their lives, but in all cases, the act of speaking up about their experiences and sharing their embodied knowledge with one another seems to feel like a relief. Recognizing that previously hidden and isolating experiences are common and can be discussed “brings immense relief and gratitude that something unsayable can now be said and shared” (Cain, 1993, p. 89). Once these women “open the door” to talking about masturbation, they seem
to feel emboldened to bring masturbation up as a regular part of conversation or even as something lighthearted and silly. Like Betty Dodson (1996), who wrote that “by laughing away myths about masturbation, I began to feel more self-confident” (p. 43), Amelia and Amy Today sound confident and content in their knowledge of masturbation, and Amelia in particular laughs in the face of potential shame. Such a jovial stance toward a practice that had at one point been a source of shame and negativity for these women suggests that they have created a counter-discourse, allowing them to resist the oppressive regulation of their autonomous sexuality. They refuse ignorance and embrace learning; they reject confusion and welcome exploration; they resist silence and chatter away; they eschew seriousness and laugh instead.

**Listening to One’s Body**

The second way I found that the women in my sample seemed to shift from feelings of confusion and/or shame to a questioning and/or rejection of these emotions was through listening closely to their embodied sensations. Participants describe both a process of embodied learning and discovery – filled with playful exploration and feeling their way through the uncertain terrain of their masturbation experiences – and also the outcomes of this embodiment on their lives. Through attending closely to what they feel in their bodies, these women report feelings of agency and deep understanding; they feel powerful and confident, and this self-assurance appears to extend beyond just the sexual realm into other parts of their lives as well.

**Embodied learning and discovery.** In the previous two chapters, I presented many examples of early and first solitary masturbation experiences. In both cases, many of the exemplars showcased embodied confusion, and in Chapter Three, I explored how participants sometimes narrated that what they felt in their bodies did not live up to their expectations and/or
that they worried there was something wrong with them. But some women narrated more positive embodiment in their early experiences of solitary masturbation, particularly when they began masturbating during or after their college years. These experiences sounded full of curiosity, which led participants to feel excited, proud, and competent.

When Asia Niece (African American, “Asia” [when I asked what she meant, she said her sexual orientation is just “me”], 30) was in eighth grade, she believed that she should be “a certain age to do certain things” and that, regarding masturbation, “I wasn’t at the right age to go ahead and, like, do that. So I didn’t do it.” As I described in Chapter Three, Asia experienced her first orgasm with her college girlfriend. A day or two after this experience, she tells me she decided to try to recreate the orgasm on her own through masturbation:

A: I did a, it was like a more like a, “Fuck it. Let me just see what happens.” So, I still had my pants on, and I had my hand in my pants, and I’m just like, “Okay.” Then I started to get a little hot. [giggle] Got a little hot. So, took my shirt off. It was like, “Okay. This is not bad.” You know, trying to figure out whatever motions kind of work or whatnot. And started feeling a little, a little bit of pleasure, uh more than before, so I’m like, “Okay. So this is, so this is how it is.” So, then I was like, “Okay. Let me get a little more comfortable.” Took my pants off. “Ohhhhh!” And then I had, I had my legs open and realized that that was taking too long. So, I closed them up a little bit when I was still going, and that felt even m-, that felt a whole lot better than having them separated. So, then, like, two minutes later, like my leg shook. So, that and it, and I was, like, “Oh.” That was it. That was, and that was really good. And I was, like, I felt extra tired. … It was pretty, it was, it was pretty cool. Mm hmm.

C: What was cool?
A: Like, just the fact that I, I could make myself, my body do something that I never thought it would be able to do before. That I, I mean, it was just, it was cool, but it was weird. ’Cause it, cause it never happened before. I never, I never experienced it. So, that was the weird part about it, but it was cool that I was able to make myself do something that I’ve seen in movies, finally, you know, and that I, you know, was, I finally got to see what my sis-, my god sister was talking about, and, like, “Ohhh. Okay.” So, then, you know, I kept on experimenting, and you know, I, I experimented for, like, three or four days in a row after that. And, I started to figure out myself more, and figure out what I like and how I liked it.

Asia Niece takes me with her on a step-by-step journey through the embodied sensations she felt during her first solitary masturbation experience, which took place in college after she had already experienced an orgasm with her girlfriend. The narration is filled with non-judgmental exploration and curiosity, excitement and pride regarding what she learns she and her body are capable of, and a newfound sense of understanding and competence regarding her sexuality. She begins her narrative by describing her state of mind when she decided to try masturbating – “Fuck it. Let me just see what happens.” This phrasing could be interpreted as a rejection of feelings of shame, similar to the way Raisin rejected the idea that God was watching and judging her while she masturbated, and the notion of “really … commit[ting]” (see above). Indeed, considering Asia’s beliefs earlier in her life that she should be “a certain age to do certain things,” perhaps she had arrived at an age (college) or experience level (having experienced an orgasm with a partner) that made her feel justified in her desire to masturbate. But “Fuck it” also sounds, in the context of the rest of Asia’s narrative, a bit like “Why not?” The rest of her narrative exudes a carefree while still keenly observant sentiment, supporting this latter
interpretation as well. Maybe it was both; she was feeling a little bit rebellious and a little bit playful.

She goes on to walk me through her embodied exploration (“trying to figure out whatever motions kind of work or whatnot”), providing such detail that her memory of the event seems crystal clear. Hers was a cyclical process of trying something, evaluating how it felt, and then responding to that sensation with a new “experiment.” First, she “had [her] hand in [her] pants” (trying something), then she started to “get a little hot” (evaluating how it felt), then she “took [her] shirt off” (trying something), then she “started feeling … a little bit of pleasure” (evaluating how it felt), and so on. This experimentation sounds curious and non-judgmental – she says “okay” in response to what she feels four times, and calmly accepts these sensations as she feels them (“so this is how it is”). She does appear to have an expectation for how long it should take her to reach the orgasm she seeks (she “realized that that was taking too long”), potentially reflecting either an interpersonal drive to become more proficient at orgasm production for the sake of partnered sex (e.g., Frith, 2013), and/or broader social discourses that construct orgasms as quick, easy, and essential (e.g., Tyler, 2004). Perhaps it is actually both for Asia. The context of this first masturbation experience, which was relatively late in her life and occurred after having already experienced orgasms with a partner, suggests that she may have had some sort of baseline from which to make (and motivations for making) judgments about her solitary orgasm. But Asia also references the media and peer influences, suggesting that she may have evaluated her experience based on common media representations of women’s sexuality, such as that women’s orgasms are quick and easy (particularly during heterosexual sex; Tyler, 2004). Despite these influences, Asia Niece nevertheless seemed to playfully investigate how to address the
issue she perceived – that her orgasm was “taking too long” – for herself (“so, I closed [my legs] up a little bit”), and had an orgasm (“two minutes later, like my leg shook”).

After feeling her way through, Asia Niece narrates being impressed with what she was capable of doing, feeling somewhat strange that she had not had this experience before, and having a deeper understanding of her experience in the context of what she had heard from others. She describes the experience as “pretty cool” while also “weird,” echoing participants in Chapter Three who found their early masturbation experiences to feel “good” and “weird.” She finds it “cool” that she “could make … [her] body do something that [she] never thought it would be able to do before,” suggesting feelings of agency both in terms of what she now knows how to do to reach orgasm (she has learned a new skill) and in terms of what her body is capable of doing (her body can now orgasm without a partner). In describing what was “weird” about it, she speaks more passively – her solitary orgasm had “never happened before” and she had “never experienced it.” But she immediately switches back to an active voice again after these statements to redefine the experience as “cool” because of her new abilities.

She also narrates a sense of understanding in the context both of representations of orgasms (or maybe masturbation?) in the media (“something that I’ve seen in movies”), and information she had received from those close to her (she “got to see what … [her] god sister was talking about”). Echoing those above, she seems relieved or perhaps a little exasperated about this new knowledge, saying twice that she “finally” understood. But this initial explorative experience is only the beginning for Asia. She says that over the next “three or four days in a row,” she “kept on experimenting,” and through this continued engagement with her embodied

27 “Legs shaking” is a common slang term for and colloquial sign of female orgasm (“Female Orgasm,” 2008). See also Fahs (2014a).
sensations, she “started to … figure out what [she] like[d] and how [she] liked it.” Through the process of “see[ing] what happens” in her body when she explores her sexuality independently, Asia Niece arrives at a place of agency and competence regarding her masturbation; she narrates feelings of power (“I can do that”) and determination (“I kept on experimenting”).

Octavia (Black, Queer, 31) narrates a similar story of embodied exploration and discovery, but goes on to explain how this experience affected her. Octavia, who has spent many years as an adult providing sex education at sex shops and sex toy parties, tells me she “didn’t get very much education” about sex or masturbation growing up. It was not covered in school (“I barely had sex ed. in high school”), her mother did not discuss it with her (“she wasn’t going to put anything out there”), and her friends were silent as well (“No.”). During her first year in college, she says she “was in the Vagina Monologues” and joined “this newly formed feminist organization” on campus as well. At an event put on by the feminist organization, she says she “won a vibrator,” and decided to give masturbation a try. Not long after, she tells me she tried masturbating without the vibrator:

O: I just masturbated with my hand. And it was, like, the first time. I was, like, “Wow! [laugh] Okay. Yeah.”

C: How’d you feel about it?

O: “I can do that.” I felt pretty, like, proud of myself more than anything else. Just that like I could do that? … I felt good about it. I felt like, “I wonder if I can do that again.”

Um, yeah. I de-, I definitely feel like it opened some kind of door for me. Also, I feel like, those were probably, like, my first orgasms that I was, like, aware of, or felt like I had a part in, or, like, were very significant to me. … Just like a thousand high fives. Like, I felt, [laugh] I was, like, “Yes!” Again. Just like this door of, like, “I can do that?”
And that it feels awesome, and, like, I don’t know. I guess, also, maybe, like, control over my body, in a way. It was really nice. … I think it, it definitely, masturbation got me more acquainted with my orgasm, like, what that feels like, and I think that definitely helped me know what that would be like with a partner, and like, what that feels like and that it’s not, for me, something that’s, like, given to me or someone makes happen, but like, I’m kind of actively participating, and I know, and I get there, and so, it’s just been helpful in that way and in knowing my body, and understanding, like, different feelings.

When Octavia tried masturbating “with [her] hand” for “the first time,” she says that the orgasms she had during this experience “opened some kind of door” for her. Unlike Kimberly, who said that talking with friends “opened the door” for more open conversations about masturbation, Octavia narrates an experience of her embodied exploration “open[ing] some kind of door” for her herself. Like Asia Niece, Octavia narrates embodied pleasure (“it feels awesome”), a non-judgmental curiosity about what she feels (“okay”), and surprise (“Wow!”) about her newly discovered capabilities (“I can do that”); she specifically says she felt “proud of [her]self more than anything else.” While this pride could be an internal sort of personal pride at having discovered something new she could do, it could also reflect discursive notions of self-improvement and achievement (e.g., Burns, Futch & Tolman, 2011; see Chapter Three for more examples), or pride reflecting the norms she had been exposed to in the feminist groups she participated in in college. Perhaps she feels proud for all of these reasons, but the rest of her narrative suggests that unlike the participants I presented in Chapter Three, Octavia does not seem concerned with masturbating in any “right” way. She sounds very excited about having made this agentic discovery (“Just like a thousand high fives. … I was, like, ‘Yes!’”), and also
echoes Asia Niece in her apparent curiosity and motivation to recreate the experience (“I wonder if I can do that again”).

Though she is unclear about whether she had her first orgasms during this experience (“those were probably, like, my first orgasms that I was, like, aware of, or felt like I had a part in, or, like, were very significant to me”), her sense of pride seems to shine through (“I had a part in”), and the orgasms she experienced seem to have been of a different character than others she may (or may not) have had (they “were very significant to [her]”). But her language here is hesitant; she says these orgasms were “probably” the first ones that she was “like aware of, or felt like [she] had a part in.” Perhaps she is struggling to remember exactly what happened and when, and is reconstructing this event through the lens of her current social world (Haug, 2008). As a woman who has spent many years extolling the virtues of masturbation (both in college as a feminist group member and Vagina Monologues participant, and after college as a sex educator), Octavia may believe that the orgasms a woman can provide herself are politically important, and so she retroactively views her early masturbatory orgasms as “significant” as well. She says that these were the first orgasms she “felt like [she] had a part in,” which suggests that she may have experienced orgasms before these that she did not feel she had a part in (or as big of a part in), but she does not provide more context about her previous sexual relationships in this interview, so I cannot verify this interpretation. Nevertheless, her choice of words – both in their hesitancy and vagueness – suggest that there is a relational aspect of this story that would add additional complexity to my understanding of her experience, but that remains obscured in her narrative.

Beyond what she felt and thought during this one experience, Octavia explains how learning about her orgasms through masturbation affected her sexuality more broadly. She says that “masturbation got [her] more acquainted with [her] orgasm,” and that this “opened some
kind of door for [her].” Once she knew “what [her orgasm] feels like” and that she was able to provide herself with that sensation (“I can do that” and “control over my body”), she applied this knowledge to her expectations for partnered sexual contexts (“that definitely helped me know what that would be like with a partner”). But alongside extrapolating the sensations she might be able to expect from sex with a partner (she does not provide any information in the interview about whether she was in a [sexual] relationship at the time of this story), Octavia also narrates a newly agentic stance toward partner sex orgasms – she says that orgasms are “not … something that’s, like, given to me or someone makes happen,” but instead that she is “actively participating” and “ha[s] a part in” her own orgasms. The belief that orgasms are something that are given to women by a partner (traditionally, a male partner, but in this case, the gender of the partner is unknown) has also been documented for decades. Jackie Gilfoyle and colleagues (1992) found that women position themselves in heterosexual encounters as gatekeepers who give themselves to their male partners, and in return, men position themselves as the providers of women’s orgasms. This “pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse” produces an illusion of egalitarianism, but constructs men as active subjects and women as passive objects, thereby maintaining unequal sexual interactions (see also: Frith, 2013; Hyde & Jaffee, 2000).

But in Octavia’s case, since the gender of the hypothetical sexual partner is unknown, and since Octavia identifies as queer, this notion of orgasms as a “gift” from a partner takes on a new layer of meaning. Perhaps it is not the gender of the partner that is important in this ethic of reciprocity (Frith, 2013), but rather the construction of a woman’s sexuality as something to which even she herself should not have too much intimate access (she should participate in self-surveillance; Bartky, 1990; Foucault, 1977) and about which she herself should not have too much knowledge (McClelland & Fine, 2008a; Wyatt & Riederle, 1994). Keeping women from
knowing how to give themselves their own pleasure and orgasms preserves a system in which women must rely on others; they are not the agents in control. So, for Octavia to discuss the ways in which masturbation “help[ed]” her get to the point at which she “know[s] [her] body,” knows how to “get there,” and has a deeper “understanding” of “different feelings” in her body is potentially liberatory. For her to claim ownership over the gift of an orgasm – it is “not … something that’s, like, given to me or someone makes happen,” but instead is something she is “actively participating” in – suggests an embodied and agentic stance that may represent resistance to this gift discourse. Orgasms, for Octavia, no longer reside somewhere external to her own body and capabilities awaiting bestowal upon her by someone else; even during partner sex, Octavia – through her solitary masturbatory exploration – has learned how to give that gift to herself.

**Embodied agency and empowerment.** Like Octavia, many women narrated how listening to the sensations they felt in their bodies affected them. They report that their embodied focus helped them to know themselves more deeply, not just in terms of what they and their bodies are capable of or even how they understand their sexuality, but also in terms of their lives and senses of self more broadly. They report feeling confident and “empowered,” they revel in “excessive” pleasure, and they find themselves changed in profound ways because of their solitary masturbation practices.

Many women echo Octavia and Asia Niece in their feelings of control over their bodies when they masturbate. When I ask Eleanor (White, Heterosexual, 30) how solitary masturbation is different from sex with a partner, she tells me that “in some ways … masturbation is more pleasurable” because she has “complete control over” the stimulation. She continues,
I do feel that masturbation is part of knowing yourself, and knowing, you know, your body and what works for you and what doesn’t. And, so I guess, in some ways, it’s really kind of empowering to masturbate, and so, I guess, and it’s also kind of this, like, fun little, like, secret that, like after I do it, and I’m like, like, “Yeah, I just did that.” [laugh] Um, so I guess, like, that’s kind of empowering, not the, you know, feel ashamed of it, but it’s kind of nice that I have this, like, little secret to myself.

Eleanor points out two related ways that she believes solitary masturbation to be “empowering” for her: it is a part of “knowing yourself” and it is a special “little secret” and point of pride. But listening to her narrative with a hermeneutics of suspicion (Josselson, 2004), I wonder what lies beneath the surface of her words.

“Empowerment” is a concept that has been contested and debated within feminist psychology, with the crux of the issue being twofold: what does sexual empowerment actually mean, and are girls and women “really” sexually empowered if they themselves say they are (Lamb, 2010; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Peterson, 2010; Tolman, 2012)? Deborah Tolman (2012), however, suggests that the task of feminist qualitative researchers is not to judge whether or not individual girls and women are “really” empowered (whatever that might look like) when they report that they are – as Eleanor does – but rather that our project should be to examine the ways girls and women make sense of their experiences, while recognizing that their sense-making will always already be embedded in myriad discursive and relational contexts. This type of analysis, she argues, allows researchers to look beyond the question of whether women who claim to be empowered are suffering from some sort of false consciousness – an endeavor that she finds unproductive. Instead, this type of analysis can help researchers better understand the interplay
between complex and competing forces and the ways that girls and women navigate them. She writes:

Placing narrations within a larger context is feminist analysis not feminist betrayal … If girls and women are making sense of their experiences in seriously limited situations, then we cannot assume their words are true narrations or false ones. Rather, what they say constitutes ways of making sense and telling a coherent story in an already over-determined discursive theatre (p. 752).

Furthermore, cultural representations of women’s sexual empowerment are often intertwined with sexualized imagery (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2007; Levy, 2005), consumerist and neoliberal discourses (e.g., Gill, 2008; Lamb & Brown, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), and even a pressure to perform empowerment as a part of being a modern, liberated woman (e.g., Fahs, 2011; Gill, 2008).

Eleanor’s narrative, read through this lens, sounds in some ways like ventriloquation – she may be saying what she thinks is expected of her based on these empowerment discourses (Bakhtin, 1981; Brown, 1998). She says, “I guess, in some ways, it’s really kind of empowering to masturbate.” This statement is far from straightforward; she hedges and qualifies the entire way through. Is it “really” empowering to masturbate? Or only “kind of” or “in some ways”? Is she sure, or is she only “guess[ing]”? Her statements that “masturbation is part of knowing yourself” and “your body and what works for you and what doesn’t” also sounds ventriloquative. Masturbation is often culturally represented as a means for women to work to become more proficient in orgasm production, often for the sake of (male) sexual partners (e.g., Cacchioni, 2007; Frith, 2013; see Chapter One). I hear again a ghost of an imagined other in her narrative; is knowing what “works” for her part of being a good sexual partner to someone else? She
distances herself from these statements, using the second-person pronoun “you” as Raisin did above, suggesting that she may understand and even endorse the notion that women are increasingly expected to “know … what works for [them]” sexually. Ironically, while her statement that she likes having “complete control over” the stimulation she provides herself could be interpreted as a demonstration of sexual empowerment (this statement is about her agency, pleasure, and efficacy), her direct statements about empowerment sound more suspect.

Nevertheless, after she dutifully acknowledges the empowerment potential of masturbation, she returns to narrating her own experiences and what they mean to her. No longer using the indefinite “you,” she reclaims these experiences, speaking again in the first person (e.g., “after I do it … I’m like … ‘Yeah, I just did that.’”). Though she continues to use hesitant language (e.g., “I guess,” “also kind of like,” “you know”), she refers to her masturbation as a “little secret to myself.” But different from the stories of silence and silencing I presented in Chapter Three, Eleanor seems to reject the notion that her “little secret” has anything to do with shame (“not the, you know, feel ashamed of it”). Instead, it sounds like she likes having sexual experiences that are all her own. Unlike partnered sexual encounters, Eleanor finds it “fun” and “nice” to give herself sexual pleasure without anyone else knowing about it. In a social context in which women’s sexuality is constantly subject to discursive regulation (Foucault, 1978), perhaps Eleanor finds in masturbation a way to experience her sexuality that is less confined to the norms of society (though not as free from such norms as participants in Chapter Four narrated), in part because there is no one else physically present for whom she must perform. She also sounds a little prideful (“after I do it … I’m like, ‘Yeah, I just did that.’”), and reiterates her belief that her actions are “kind of empowering.” The secrecy of her masturbation appears to be part of the fun. Perhaps after she secretly provides herself with pleasure, she can smile to herself
with feelings of pride and power, knowing that there is no one for her to answer to, no explanations (or even language) necessary, no emotion work or partner concerns to think about – she is the owner of her experience. Maybe this is why she also says, “masturbation is a part of knowing yourself” (my emphasis). Beyond just learning about “your body” and “what works for you,” Eleanor says that masturbation helps her to know her self better (more on this below), which could also explain why she describes masturbation as potentially “empowering.”

Though I have suggested a relational component between the lines of Eleanor’s narrative, her feelings of pride and ownership of her experience stand in stark contrast to many of the narratives I presented in Chapter Three in which women feared that they were not masturbating the “right” way. One participant explicitly rejects the notion that there could ever be a “right” way to masturbate. Amelia (Black/African American, Straight, 26) tells me a story about reading about masturbation in Cosmopolitan magazine:

I remember reading something about, like, it wasn’t, like, the proper way to masturbate or, but it was like, I can’t remember what it was, exactly. Like, it was, it was masturbation themed, but, in, like, in almost, like, you’re-not-doing-it-right kind of way.

Like, it’s right if it feels good to me [giggle] when I’m doing it!

Though Amelia cannot remember “exactly” what she read (and she says “it wasn’t, like, the proper way to masturbate”), she remembers the overall sentiment: “you’re-not-doing-it-right.” She immediately and adamantly rejects this idea, drawing instead upon her knowledge of her own body and pleasure – “It’s right if it feels good to me when I’m doing it!” Similar to the way Asha (above) expanded her masturbation imaginary to include a broader range of potential methods, Amelia redefines what “right” means in terms of her own embodied pleasure. “Right”
is in the body of the beholder, and cannot be defined externally. “Right” is whatever “feels good to [her]” – period.

This focus on pleasure as the barometer for a good masturbation experience was evident in many participants’ narratives. Several participants described masturbation experiences in which they basked in abundant pleasure without any concern for doing things the “right” way or fears of being overly “excessive” (see Chapter Three). Participants described masturbation experiences in which they had many orgasms (Eve [White, Straight, 24]: “I orgasmed and then felt like doing some more, so it’s just like a multiple orgasm masturbation session”), in which they had particularly strong orgasms (Alice [Black/Asian, Heterosexual, 29]: “It felt like my entire body was, like, tingling … the pleasure was so, so powerful.”), in which they continued to masturbate for a long period of time (Eleanor [White, Heterosexual, 30]: “it kind of became this, like, long-term masturbation session … which was really nice and kind of powerful to have, like, to give yourself permission to have that time to just explore and feel pleasure”), and even in which they feel like they lose control (Cici [White, Straight, 30]: “Climaxing is great! … It’s just, like, you lose complete control, and it just feels so good.”). Kimberly’s (Caucasian, Straight/Hetero, 29) story about a really great masturbation experience (a question all participants were asked) serves as an exemplar:

It was, like, forever. It was, like, an hour, which is not, I don’t usually have the luxury of [giggle], like masturbating for an hour. And, um, I did, like, went to different positions, and I had my, um, vibrator, and, but I only used it, like, a little bit here and there, to just, like, build it up. And it was just a really, like, I was, like, sweating. I don’t usually get so, like, you know, into it. Um, ‘cause I was, like, really invested in this session. And then,
the, so the orgasm was really good. Like, it was really, like, satisfying, and I was, like, totally, like, spent after. And had to just like lay there.

Kimberly’s story echoes the stories of participants above in terms of embodied pleasure (“the orgasm was really good … really, like, satisfying”), masturbating for a long period of time (“It was, like, forever. It was, like, an hour”), and masturbating in whatever way feels right in the moment (going into “different positions;” using the vibrator “a little bit here and there”). Like Eleanor, who says that she gave herself “permission” to spend a lot of time masturbating, Kimberly calls this type of experience a “luxury.” Though Kimberly does not directly narrate giving herself permission to masturbate for an hour, she hints at this notion when she says that spending so much time on masturbation is unusual (she says “I don’t usually” twice), and that this particular time, she was “really invested.” By allowing herself the “luxury” of “invest[ing]” “an hour” in her masturbation, Kimberly demonstrates resistance both to the norm that orgasms should be quick and easy (Tyler, 2004), and to the norm that women should avoid “excessive” expressions of sexual pleasure (McClelland & Fine, 2008a). But this resistance is tempered by the apparent rarity of the experience. Spending so much time on her own pleasure is constructed as an “unusual” “luxury,” suggesting that Kimberly may view this sort of dedication to embodied pleasure as indulgent, or perhaps she does not generally have the time and/or privacy to give herself this gift.

Nevertheless, the experience sounds playful and somewhat aimless; though she notes the “really good” and “really … satisfying” orgasm she has, this does not sound like the defining feature of the experience – it sounds more like an afterthought. Most of her narrative is concerned with other aspects of the experience including the multiple methods and strategies she employed, the embodied “build up” she felt, the unusualness of the experience, the signs of her
investment (“I was, like, sweating,” “I don’t usually get so … into it” and “I was … really invested”), and the way she felt after her orgasm (“totally … spent;” “had to just lay there”). Perhaps, like Eleanor, Kimberly is aware of the cultural importance of orgasms (e.g., Frith, 2013), and so makes sure to include a reference to the quality of her orgasm in this narrative (Brown, 1998). Alternatively, perhaps her “really good” orgasm is a crucial component of this experience for her, but her references to so many other positive aspects suggest that there was a lot about the experience that felt great to her.

While the women above narrate feelings of pride, ownership and an enjoyment of unrestricted sexual pleasure, a few women explain how masturbation affected their lives more broadly. For instance, though Ashley (White, Straight, 29) tells me (above) that the shameful messages women and girls receive about masturbation are “terrible,” she also tells me (in Chapter Three) that when she was younger, she was afraid to begin masturbating because she thought “something bad would happen,” and so she did not start masturbating until she was a freshman in college. At the end of our interview, I ask her if there is anything else she thinks I should know. She says,

A: I wish I’d started earlier. I think, um, I actually think that might have made me, it would have helped me to sort of, like, come out of my shell more and be a little more, um, I mean, I was very quiet and awkward and, what teenager isn’t awkward? But, um, I feel like that would have helped. I don’t know how it would have helped, but I feel like it would have made me, maybe just, it would have, like, because it helped me learn about my body and sort of, like, who I am, and things like that. Um, and if I had learned that earlier, it might have, I don’t know, it might have helped me sort of be a little more outgoing. Um, my freshman year, things like that. So.
C: And are you talking about, might have made you more outgoing in, like, dating situations or just in general?

A: I think in general. Um, I mean, definitely, dating situations, but, I don’t know. Maybe because I associate my friends from college with that, and they had all masturbated and whatever, and they were definitely um, more outgoing. But I think, you know, I just saw that in myself, though, like, once I masturbated, it just, I was different. Um, not, like, you know, incredibly, noticeably changed. Different. But um I felt different. I felt better and sort of had a sense of who I was more. Maybe that’s also part of college, too, but, um, I think if it was earlier it would have been, I would have just been more outgoing or just, more okay with myself, I guess.

Ashley begins by narrating the sentiment several women shared – that she “wish[es] [she]’d started [masturbating] earlier.” But this narrative, like many above, is filled with uncertainty (e.g., she says “sort of” four times, and “I don’t know” three times); she seems to be unsure about many aspects of this “wish” including how she thinks masturbating earlier might have helped her (“I don’t know how it would have helped;” “it might have, I don’t know, it might have helped me sort of be a little more outgoing”) and why (“maybe because I associate my friends from college with that [being more outgoing], and they had all masturbated” or “once I masturbated, it just, I was different”). As an interviewer, I add to this confusion by providing Ashley with words that do not seem to help. I ask her to clarify if her comments that masturbation might have made her more outgoing were about “dating situations or just in general.” Her response ventriloquates my language (“I think in general. Um, I mean, definitely, dating situations”), and lands her right back in her uncertainty again (“but, I don’t know”). This “I don’t know” could also be a way for Ashley to disagree with my suggestion in a polite way.
From start to finish (she ends the narrative with “I guess”), Ashley appears to be working out what she thinks in the moment, and trying on multiple justifications for her “wish.”

Nevertheless, Ashley is clear that masturbation helped her not just to “learn about [her] body” but also to learn about herself (“who I am”), echoing Eleanor above. She says that “once [she] masturbated,” she “saw … in [her]self” that she “was different.” Though she clarifies that this change was subtle (“not … incredibly, noticeably changed”), and potentially related to the college experience in general (“maybe that’s also part of college”), she comes back to masturbation as a source of positive change for her – “I felt better and sort of had a sense of who I was more.” Though Ashley’s narration that masturbation could have given her more confidence “in general” is suspect because of my role in that exchange, these latter references to how she thinks masturbation changed her are more trustworthy. Not only does she say that “once [she] masturbated” she “felt different,” but also that she “was different” (my emphases); she “had a better sense of who [she] was.” It seems that this change is what resonates for Ashley as the reason why she thinks that masturbating earlier might have benefited her. After thinking her reasoning through aloud, she appears to settle on this explanation, saying, “if it was earlier [that I had started masturbating] … I would have just been more outgoing or just, more okay with myself.” While some women told me that they wished they had masturbated sooner because they missed out on years of sexual pleasure (e.g., Michele White, Queer/Bisexual, 27] says, “I wish I’d known about it earlier, so like, you know, I had several wasted years when I could have been masturbating”), Ashley’s narrative is not (directly) about pleasure. Instead, she narrates the belief that masturbation has helped her to know herself (“I … had a sense of who I was more”) and accept herself (“more okay with myself”), and that she wishes the confidence that accompanied these changes (“more outgoing”) had happened sooner.
Free@30 (Black, No Label, 34) echoes the notion that solitary masturbation can change a person not just sexually, but in far-reaching areas of her life. As I presented in Chapter Three, Free@30 was raised going to a church that taught her that “masturbation was bad.” She married a man in her early twenties and had two children, but realized in her late twenties, by talking to her younger sister, that she was not having orgasms during sex (“This isn’t fair. And I have two children, and I’ve never had an orgasm”). So at the age of twenty-nine, she decided to try masturbating, and though her first experience made her feel like she was “doing something wrong” (see Chapter Three), she tells me that starting to masturbate had a profound affect on her life:

F: I think it’s completely helped me, as far as knowing what I like and what I don’t like, and pleasing myself before anything else, you know? It definitely raised my confidence level.

C: Yeah, why do you think that happened?

F: Cause, uh, I was more comfortable with me, and I learned that I’m beautiful in every way. And, before, I was, like, more, my, my self-esteem was low. I didn’t really like my body. I thought that the only thing that I’m good for is sex, but it doesn’t have to feel good, because it’s not really for me, anyway. Once I got to the point where I was comfortable with myself, then I was like, “Oh, no. A lot of this, this has to change. I don’t have to accept what you’re giving me. Like, this isn’t okay. If I can do it, you should be able to do it, too, right?” [laugh] So, um, it was like, “Oh, you can’t, I can’t settle for what you’re just, for anything.” So, it, it really helped me in, oh, my overall life. I like, packed up and moved to another country. [laugh] And I think that the masturbation helped me to realize that I wasn’t attracted to, I’m not going to say men, I’m going to say
the person that I was with at the time. And then, I realized, “Oh, I’ve never had an orgasm with a man.” I was, like, “What is that about?” And then, when I learned what an orgasm was and what it took to please me, and then I was like, “Okay.” And then, I started to explore different things. And it was, like, “Oh. This is better. [laugh] Okay. This is what it’s supposed be feel like.” And, so I think, without getting to know myself and my likes and dislikes and just building that confidence, that I wouldn’t have ever made that step.

C: And it sounds like it, you know, built your self-confidence in your sex life,

F: Yeah.

C: But maybe also just in your life more broadly?

F: Yes. Yes.

C: Can you talk about that a little?

F: Like I said, I just up and moved. I, I

C: This is when you went overseas?

F: Yeah. I, um, was doing work in a call center. And I was a substitute teacher. And, um, I was in a marriage where he continued to cheat on me, and I felt like everything was wrong with me. And when I started to gain control of my life and myself and doing things that I liked to do and getting to know me, it just woke me up to a lot of the other things that, I wasn’t just settling for bad sex, I was settling for this job that I really didn’t want, and I was settling for this relationship that really wasn’t good for me. And then, um, I had to really sit down and say, “Well, what do you want? What is, like, the big vibrator?” [laugh]
Free@30 walks me through the ways in which her masturbation changed her life. Though her narrative showcases a particularly profound experience, she still echoes other participants presented in this chapter, and her experience showcases many of the threads I have explored throughout this dissertation. She begins by telling me that masturbation has “completely helped” her in terms of understanding her sexual preferences (“knowing what I like and what I don’t like”), expanding her feelings of sexual entitlement (“pleasing myself before anything else”), and “rais[ing] [her] confidence level.” Like Ashley, Free@30 seems to see herself in a new light once she begins masturbating and understanding her body and pleasure. Before her embodied learning, Free says there was a lot in her life that she was “settling for”: “bad sex” (“it’s not really for me, anyway”), a “relationship that really wasn’t good” for her, a job she “really didn’t want,” and low self-esteem (“my self-esteem was low. I didn’t really like my body. I thought that the only thing I’m good for is sex”). But through becoming “comfortable with [her]self” she rejected this negativity in her life (“Oh, no. … this isn’t okay.”), and set out to change it (“a lot of this … has to change. … I can’t settle for … anything.”).

Masturbating helped Free@30 to become “more comfortable” with herself through a process of “learn[ing] what an orgasm was and what it took to please [her].” She narrates a process similar to Asia Niece’s in which she “explore[d] different things,” and non-judgmentally reacted to the new sensations she felt (she says “okay” twice, and “Oh. This is better.”). She also thinks to herself, “Okay. This is what it’s supposed to feel like,” potentially echoing both the concern with whether “this is how it’s supposed to feel” (similar to Jessica, see Chapter Three) and a deeper understanding of embodied sensations in the context of what others have told her (like Asia Niece narrates above). Because she sounds sure that what she is feeling in her body is exactly what she is “supposed to” feel, I think her experience may have been more similar to
Asia Niece’s than Jessica’s – others had told her about orgasms (her sister) and when she experienced them herself, she was able to recognize that sensation as the one she was seeking.

After this initial embodied step of learning “what it took to please [her]” and her “likes and dislikes,” she says she “realize[d] that she wasn’t attracted to” her husband. After years of feeling “like everything was wrong with [her]” (and this sounds like she may have blamed herself for her husband “continu[ing] to cheat on [her]”), and thinking that sex “doesn’t have to feel good because it’s not really for [her] anyway,” she suddenly finds this unacceptable (“I don’t have to accept what you’re giving me”). Her stance shifts from one of hopeless resignation to one of righteous indignation. Sex without pleasure and/or orgasms now appears to Free@30 to be problematic and unjust (“If I can do it, you should be able to do it, too, right?”). She says she was no longer able to tolerate this state of affairs – not only does she not “have to accept” it, she “can’t settle for” it (my emphases). In a context in which Black woman continue to be constructed as out-of-control Jezebels (Collins, 2000, 2005; Stephens & Phillips, 2003), this type of self-exploration and unbridled insistence on the importance of her own pleasure is all the more remarkable. She says that this improved “confidence” “really helped” her to be able to take “step[s]” to change her “overall life” (“getting to know me, it just woke me up to a lot of the other things”). She left her husband (elsewhere in the interview she says she “got a divorce when [she] turned thirty”). She quit her jobs and “packed up and moved to another country.” And she “started to gain control of [her] life and [her]self.” She became more “comfortable” with herself (she says this twice), she felt more “confident” in what she liked and wanted (she says this twice), and she began to see herself as “beautiful in every way.”
Learning that she had the power to decide what she wanted not just sexually, but in her life more broadly, Free@30 says she “had to really sit down” and ask herself, “Well, what do you want? What is, like, the big vibrator?” Using the vibrator as a metaphor for the transformative power of embodied knowledge (see also Fahs, 2014a), Free@30 seems to have found liberation in masturbation. Even the name she chose for herself in this study suggests that she finally felt “free at 30” – the year she left her husband, and a year after she first masturbated. Buying a vibrator and learning how to provide herself with pleasure and orgasms opened her eyes (“woke me up”) and rearranged all that she thought she had known about her sexuality. She realized that she was entitled to pleasure and orgasms. And though Free@30 narrates wondering what the “big vibrator” is that can do for her life what masturbation has done for her sexuality, it seems possible that they are one and the same. Masturbation appears to have changed much more for Free@30 than her attitude toward her sexuality; it changed the way she viewed her entire life. It provided her with a new lens through which to examine every aspect of her existence, and it provided her with the confidence to no longer accept what she found to be unacceptable.

Free@30’s experience is an example of precisely what Audre Lorde (1984) wrote about in her iconic essay “The Erotic as Power,” and what Cesnabmihiilo Dorothy Aken’ova spoke

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28 It could be argued that, as was the case with Ashley, my words as an interviewer could have implications for this interpretation. That is, I do ask Free@30 whether she thinks masturbation “built [her] self-confidence in [her] sex life, but maybe also just in [her] life more broadly.” She responds, “Yes. Yes,” and I ask her to talk more about that. Was I providing language for Free@30 in a way that is problematic for my analysis? I contend that in this case, the question I ask in the interview does not stand to disrupt the interpretations I make. Unlike in the interview with Ashley, in this interview, the question I pose to Free@30 relies on information she has already provided in the interview. Just a moment before I ask this question, she says, “A lot of this has to change. I don’t have to accept what you’re giving me. Like this isn’t okay. … So, it, it really helped me in, oh, my overall life. I like, packed up and moved to another country.” In this context, my question about her “life more broadly” stands on the solid foundation Free@30 has already laid for me.
about regarding Nigerian women’s orgasms (quoted in McClelland & Fine, 2008a) – the power of a woman’s intimate self-knowledge and ability to find sexual satisfaction from within to change her entire life outlook. “Our erotic knowledge empowers us,” wrote Lorde (1984), “[it] becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (p. 57). For Free@30, the “erotic knowledge” she gained through solitary masturbation changed the way she viewed her entire world. Her newfound “lens” allowed her to see problematic aspects of her life that had never before seemed so problematic – she “scrutinize[d] all aspects of [her] existence,” and determined that “a lot of … this has to change.” Free@30 needed sexual pleasure and orgasms in order to find justice in her life both intimately and more broadly (McClelland, 2010; McClelland & Fine, 2008a). She needed to first learn to provide herself with “that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of” (Lorde, 1984, p. 57), so that she could demand that same joy in the rest of her life.

While Free@30’s inspirational experience is a particularly clear example, it sits alongside other tales of embodied transformation in this section that, together, illuminate a powerful site of resistance to the regulatory grip of oppressive social norms – a woman’s own body and erotic pleasure. Like the classic tale of Dorothy searching everywhere for her “heart’s desire” and learning that she need not have looked beyond her “own back yard” (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939), many women in my sample told me about how transformative it was for them to realize that the pleasure they were seeking – in some cases even the self they were seeking – was within them all along. Once they gained this understanding, life was different. They felt confident, proud, indignant, curious, willful, carefree, clear-headed, and powerful. By listening to their bodies and allowing their embodied experiences to inform their attitudes toward solitary masturbation, these
women were able to reject the discourses that had shamed them earlier in their lives, and come to a place of enduring self-love.

**Conclusion**

The findings I have presented in this chapter suggest that there are multiple means by which the women in my sample have come to reject the negative messages about solitary masturbation that they had once internalized. These women seek out new information both independently and with friends, they normalize masturbation for one another through inquisitive and spirited conversations, and they explore their embodied sensation. By talking openly and jovially with friends about solitary masturbation experiences, these women create a counter-discourse that stands to resist oppressive norms. In place of the dominant notion that women’s masturbation is embarrassing, uncommon, or shameful, these women’s shared experiences of solitary pleasure created the space for a more normalized understanding. Even cases in which women sought out new information independently (such as seeking out pornography or books) were still social learning experiences – they watched other people in pornography or read the words of other people in books. These counter-discourses provided participants with alternative ways to think about masturbation, thereby weakening the grip of dominant ways of thinking. The normalizing function of these counter-discourses provided these women with clarity where there was once confusion and validated autonomous pleasure seeking as a perfectly acceptable – and even encouraged – practice.

When women let their bodies speak and listened to what they said (Cixous et al., 1976), they were also able to find liberation. Even in the experiences women narrated of seeking out new information via books or friends, the body was ever-present. By paying attention to their
pleasurable sensations and exploring themselves with patience and compassion, these women were able to learn not just about their sexualities, but also about who they were. They let themselves revel in “excessive” pleasure, reaffirming their right to their own bodies and pleasures on their own terms. They expressed newfound confidence where once there was quiet confusion. They felt self-sufficient and expressed no longer “needing” any other person to find satisfaction. Their embodied knowledge profoundly affected them – it changed not just their bodies, but also their minds and their selves. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) wrote, “I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather I am my body” (p. 150). The women in my sample told me stories of the inseparability of their minds and bodies. When they learned something about their bodies they learned something about themselves. When they felt happy in their bodies, they felt happy with themselves. The closer they listened to their bodies, the closer they got to understanding who they were as people. And as Ashley and Free@30 demonstrated, this type of intimate self-knowledge can change everything.
Chapter Six: Conclusion
Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge. They are chaotic, sometimes painful, sometimes contradictory, but they come from deep within us. And we must key into those feelings and begin to extrapolate from them, examine them for new ways of understanding our experiences. This is how new visions begin.

—Audre Lorde, Conversation with Claudia Tate, 1982

I have been amazed more than once by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own which she had been secretly haunting since early childhood. A world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity. This practice, extraordinarily rich and inventive, in particular as concerns masturbation, is prolonged or accompanied by a production of forms, a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful.


*How do you know?* It was a question I asked incessantly as a child. In particular, I asked this question about those concepts and experiences that eluded precision, that slipped beneath the surface just at the moment I thought I understood. I asked about love, death, God, justice, sex.

Sometimes I used the question to interrogate the credibility of the knowledge-bearer; with squinted eyes and a hand on my hip, I demanded, “How do you know?” But more often than not, I asked this question so I could follow the path of the knowledge-bearer, picking up their breadcrumbs, hopeful I would arrive at a knowledge of my own; tilting my head to the side, the corners of my mouth turned into a frown, I implored, “How do you know?” The latter question
seemed inevitably harder to answer than the former. You can tell me that you are a person of experience, of pedigree or intellect or age, a person who has degrees and licenses and is certified to know. Demonstrating your authority to know is simple. But answering my question as to how you know – and implied in this question is another: how you can be sure you know – is complicated, especially regarding the substantial and amorphous concepts I was most curious about. Attempts to answer my question, met with an ever-dissatisfied inquiring gaze, left knowledge-bearers throwing their hands skyward in exasperation. “I just know,” they stammered, shaking their heads, “I can’t explain it, but I know it in my bones.”

Knowledge-from-the-body, this knowing-in-your-bones, is the sort of insight that can be difficult to put into words. As Audre Lorde says, these “feelings” are “chaotic, sometimes painful, [and] sometimes contradictory” – they defy the structure and form of language. Nevertheless, inchoate embodied feelings can generate new truths. For Lorde, there is no more “genuine path to knowledge” than listening to these forces “deep within us.” But a path to knowledge, particularly one that relies on the breadcrumbs of contradictory and chaotic embodiment, is not without effort. Helene Cixous details a process of “experimentation” and “interrogation” of the sensations in the body, a process that might be carried out in “secret,” but that still remains full of willful subjectivity (Ahmed, 2014). The tales Cixous recounts of childhood masturbation are adventurous and productive. Girls “invent” a “vision” for themselves through their relentless pursuit of embodied knowledge, and come to a place of “rapture” and beauty. They find a wordless wisdom by looking within.

In this dissertation, I have explored how it is that women know themselves sexually, and the role that solitary masturbation plays in that knowledge. I have immersed myself in the stories of women, listening as they wove together intricate and intimate details of their experiences. I
bore witness to the complexities of their thought processes throughout their lives, seeing my childhood query reflected back at me as women questioned, discovered, yearned, critiqued, insisted, and wondered. Far from simply “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1977), I found that these women’s bodies and subjectivities were also dynamic, powerful, and constructive. While women told me stories of confusion, shame, worry, and uncertainty, these experiences were less like roadblocks and more like speed bumps on the path to sexual self-understanding; they were slowed down, but not deterred. When the women I spoke with encountered social stigma or regulation, when they felt sensations in their bodies that they did not understand, when they were silenced, they often propelled themselves forward, refusing fear and embracing curiosity. They were pioneers of their own bodies, determined to map uncharted sensory terrains.

In the following pages, I reflect on the major findings of this dissertation. After providing an overview of these findings, I reflect more thoroughly on a few specific ideas that I believe my work brings to light. First, I discuss the thread of relationality that I detected throughout my analyses, and I suggest that women’s sexuality may be governed not just by the institution of heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), but also by a parallel institution of relational sexuality. Next, I explore the significance of extra-discursive masturbation experiences, and examine what may be gained and/or lost when an embodied experience meets the air of discourse and language. I then consider women’s consistently willful subjectivities (Ahmed, 2014), and argue for further explorations into what might exist between oppression and liberation. Finally, I note the limitations of this dissertation, and end with a closing statement on the importance of focusing on embodied sensation for inquiries into women’s sexual subjectivity.
Overview of Major Findings

In Chapter Three, I presented an analysis suggesting that the regulatory power of dominant social discourses regarding women’s sexuality and masturbation can become psychologically internalized, thereby informing women’s embodied experiences. When the women I spoke to attempted to navigate the tension they experienced between their embodied pleasure and shaming/silencing social norms, they often felt confused; “I’m like really lost here,” said Ashley2. I found that part of this confusion seemed to stem from expectations that masturbation would produce quick and easy orgasms; as Michele said, “I was pretty frustrated, because I thought it would be, like, Boom!” When early masturbation experiences did not align with these expectations, women often questioned themselves: Is this feeling right? Is this method right? Is something wrong with me? Participants also told me about applying their knowledge of the social stigmatization of women’s sexuality in general to the specific activity of solitary masturbation to conclude that masturbation must somehow be negative too. They drew on discourses of morality (including religion), sexual excess, consequences, and relationality in their attempts to make sense of their experiences. But despite their uncertainty and concern – for themselves and for partners, both real and imagined – these women remained grounded by their resolute attention to their embodied sensations. Even in the midst of navigating the norms of their (hetero)sexist and racist surroundings, the willful determination to understand these sensations shone through.

Against this backdrop of internalized oppressive norms (even if resisted), the extra-discursive childhood masturbation experiences presented in Chapter Four appear revelatory. For a brief but significant moment, some pre-pubescent children seem not to be burdened by the mandates of social discourses regulating masturbation. They feel neither shame nor pride, neither
a drive to achieve nor confidence in the status quo. Their experiences are surprising and pleasurable, generally nonchalant and satisfactory as they are, and, importantly, exist as sensations in the body. As Cixous (1976) would argue, as children, these women were able to let their bodies speak and listen to what they said. This embodied attention extended even into how some girls were able to learn that their previously extra-discursive activity was considered sexual – by listening to the sensations they felt in their bodies, they could connect their masturbation to the realm of sexuality. Eventually, these children would gain access to oppressive discourses that can stifle such embodied knowledge and learning. But perhaps experiencing a brief time period in which embodied pleasure is not weighed down by other expectations could provide women with an internal grounding for navigating challenging discursive fields in the future.

The freedom from discursive regulation that some women experienced as children was inevitably short-lived. As the findings presented in Chapter Three attest, knowledge of social norms eventually commingled with embodied knowledge to produce feelings of confusion and shame. But this was not the end of the story; it was only the beginning. In Chapter Five, I presented the stories of women who searched for truths beyond the grips of suppression, who were adamantly devoted to pleasures, who laughed in the face of solemnity. They rejected the discourses that burdened them, and willfully endeavored to understand themselves on their own terms. They sought out information independently from pornography and books, they exchanged tips and joked with friends, and they came to see their practices as normal and beautiful and important. Having created these counter-discourses, they recounted lighthearted feelings of excitement, pride, confidence, and expertise. They narrated how the experience of learning about their sexual selves changed them in both body and mind; and for a few, it changed their lives.
The Relationality of Women’s Solitary Masturbation Experiences

Though I intentionally focused this dissertation on women’s experiences of solitary masturbation, my social psychological background informed the conception, design, implementation, and analysis of this work. As I expected based on social psychological theory, the women I talked to internalized social norms about sexuality and masturbation and narrated experiences of being physically alone, but nevertheless bound up in the mandates of discourse. Additionally, relational others – both real and imagined – played a major role in individual women’s solitary sex. The relationality of women’s narrations seemed always to be just beneath the surface, and it bubbled up in two major forms: women made reference to imagined future sexual partners as well as to their current sexual partners.

When women masturbated before having had partnered sexual experiences, they sometimes thought about future partners during these experiences. This *partner imaginary* often played the role of reconstructing solitary experiences of pleasure in terms of what they might mean for others in the future. Asha’s (South Asian/White, Bi/Pansexual, 30) concern that she should “save” her orgasm for “someone [she] cared about” so that it would not be a “waste” reflects the traditional sexist notion that women’s sexuality should always be in service to sexual partners (Rich, 1980). Though Asha also narrated curiosity, agency, and pleasure, she shut down her body’s arousal out of “fear.” Women’s partner imaginary thus seems capable of informing their embodied experiences. Indeed, Cici (White, Straight, 30) narrated a related but somewhat different concern about a future partner. After giving herself orgasms, she wondered how a male partner would be able to recreate them during sex: “How’s he going to do this – with his penis?” Her focus on the importance of a partner (and in particular, his penis’ ability to provide her with pleasure) in future sexual encounters exemplifies the (hetero)sexist notion that penile-vaginal
intercourse is the most natural and essential expression of sexuality (Frith, 2013; Gavey, McPhillips, & Braun, 1999). Importantly though, both of these women seemed to value their embodied pleasure. They demonstrated agency and entitlement as they explored their sensations, sought out knowledge, and insisted on the importance of their orgasms (whether they allowed themselves to experience them or not).

Some women who were currently in relationships or who had experienced partnered sexual relationships in the past narrated concerns about real (rather than imagined) sexual partners when they talked about their solitary masturbation. Some participants told me they worried about getting “caught” masturbating by a sexual partner, while other participants explained that they would feel upset if they “caught” their partner masturbating. Some participants hid their masturbation from their partners out of fear of their partners’ judgment, while others did so out of “respect” for their partner’s feelings. These narratives were characterized by a prioritization of partnered sex over solitary masturbation, and by the constant emotion work or relational sex work women did on behalf of their partners; these women seemed to focus on managing their own and their partners’ desires, pleasures, and behaviors even when it came to their own solitary masturbation (Cacchioni, 2007; Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Fahs, 2014a; Hochschild, 1983; Hochschild & Machung, 1989).

Importantly, both queer and straight women narrated prioritizing partner sex and doing relational sex work/emotion work on behalf of their partners. Adrienne Rich’s (1980) theory of institutional heterosexuality – a theory that has grounded this dissertation – might predict that only women who are in sexual relationships with men would narrate molding their solitary sexual experiences around the emotions and desires of a sexual partner. That is, since Rich’s theory posits that women’s sexuality has traditionally been defined in terms of men (i.e.,
reproduction and/or male sexual pleasure), it might be expected that women who are in sexual relationships with other women could somehow avoid the social mandate for women’s sexuality to be primarily partner-focused. But according to my data, women of all sexual orientations may worry about their partners in regards to solitary masturbation.

My analysis suggests that alongside an institution of heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) governing women’s solitary sexual activities, there may be an *institution of relational sexuality* at play. The constant underlying thread of relationality in participants’ narratives about a sexual behavior that was physically solitary suggests that *self-pleasure itself is counter-normative* for women, regardless of sexual orientation. I propose that this institution takes up many of the components of Rich’s institution of heterosexuality; it is still a sexist system in which women are held to standards that are different from those governing men, women’s sexuality is still constructed as on the verge of excess (McClelland & Fine, 2008a), and women are still expected to prioritize the emotions and desires of others in their sexuality. However, unlike Rich’s institution of heterosexuality, an institution of relational sexuality broadens the scope of regulation to include women who are in relationships with other women. My findings suggest that concern for others – the relational sex work/emotion work that women do – is a factor in these women’s relationships regardless of their sexual orientation.

Researchers doing work on sexual orientation as it pertains to relationships, masculinity and femininity ideologies in relationships, and masturbation should incorporate this new idea into their work. A fascinating next step for this research could be to interview couples – both queer and straight, both women and men, both as a couple and independently – to see how they negotiate sexual pleasure and masturbation in their relationships. How does pornography use fit in? What about sexual fantasies? Sex toys? Does the meaning of the use of these arousal aids
differ when they are used together or solitarily? Do couples discuss these issues with one another? What does a conversation or an argument about masturbation look like in a partnership? What additional reasons do women and men give for hiding their masturbation from a partner and/or feeling upset when a partner masturbates? Do any of these reasons or experiences differ by gender or sexual orientation? Do they differ by race, class or education level? Do men do relational sex work/emotion work regarding solitary masturbation in their partnerships too? All of these questions and more could take up my findings about the relationality of women’s solitary sexual experiences to further illuminate the complex intermingling of our society’s sexual norms, our interpersonal priorities, and our individual desires and pleasures.

Extra-Discursive Experiences and Entering Discourse: What is Gained and/or Lost?

The possibility of extra-discursive experiences and the relation of these experiences to women’s liberation has been a driving force of this dissertation (Cain, 1993). Maureen Cain (1993) suggested that it is possible for individuals to have experiences that they do not yet have a language or a social discourse with which to make sense thereof. These extra-discursive experiences “pre-exist [their] possible utterance” (p. 83), and so are theorized to not be regulated by the mandates of social discourses. My finding, as I stated above, that many women in my sample experienced their pre-pubescent solitary masturbation extra-discursively, has implications for feminist theory and research.

Traditionally, feminist theory and research has suggested that the lack of language – the silencing of women’s voices and the refusal to name and advocate for women’s concerns – presents a barrier to women’s liberation (e.g., Barbach, 1974; Fine, 1988; Weitz, 1982). For example, Michelle Fine’s (1988; see also Fine & McClelland, 2006) suggestion that sex
education programs tend to have a “missing discourse of desire” was meant to bring language to a phenomenon that was present but actively silenced (Tuana, 2004) – girls’ sexual desire. By naming these experiences, Fine sought to make them visible and to validate them so that girls could hopefully reclaim such experiences for themselves (consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s used a similar philosophy). In short, Fine’s effort was one in which naming an experience was meant to liberate it.

But my findings suggest that language and discourse can play a different role in women’s liberation as well. It seems that there are certain instances in which “missing discourses” can actually be productive. Some of the women in my sample narrated childhood experiences in which they explored their bodies and their sensations without any knowledge of the language that society might use to describe their activities, nor the meaning society might ascribe thereto. They had a missing discourse of masturbation. But in the case of these women, this missing discourse did not seem oppressive; rather, they described these experiences as carefree, exploratory, pleasurable, and exciting. I suggest, then, that the nature of the missing discourse is crucial in theorizing its potential to benefit women. When women lack access to a liberatory discourse – such as the notion that women’s sexual desire is normative (Fine, 1988) – the lack of access to that discourse works to oppress them. However, when women lack access to an oppressive discourse – such as the notion that women’s masturbation is taboo – the lack of access to that discourse may provide women with the cognitive freedom to explore without shame or discursive regulation. Given that feminist work has labored to include women’s experiences within language for political purposes, my findings add an important caveat to this mission: the nature of the language and discourse in question matter.
My finding that women’s early extra-discursive masturbation experiences can create the cognitive space for regulation-free exploration raises an important philosophical question: What is lost when language is gained? Or, more specifically for this work, what happens to embodied sensation when it becomes entangled in discourse? My analysis highlights the social psychological process that some women go through in which they learn that their previously free-floating sensory experiences are considered sexual. A few women detailed this process in embodied terms, connecting the feelings they sensed in their bodies when they masturbated to similar sensations they felt when, for example, watching people kiss on television. The recognition of similar embodied sensations provided a pathway to recognizing solitary masturbation as sexual, and thus, as tied to discourse. But once embodied pleasures are wrapped up in discourse, what happens to them? Are they experienced in the same way? Or does the discoursing of an experience change it? My analysis provides a preliminary answer: once women understand their embodied sensations in a discursive context, those discourses appear to forever after inform the experience (see, e.g., Chapter Three). But is being embedded in discourse good or bad for embodied experiences? In what ways can an entrance into language/discourse be beneficial and/or restrictive?

In psychology and physics, there is a concept known as the observer effect, which states that often, the very act of observing or measuring something can change it. In psychology, this effect is usually mobilized to refer to the phenomenon of research participants behaving differently than they usually would when they are aware that they are being observed. But I wonder whether a parallel phenomenon could be at play on an intra-individual level. What happens to embodied sensations when we “observe” them or name them, and how might this naming be productive and/or destructive? An example may prove useful in thinking through this
challenging question: When a musician and a non-musician listen to the same piece of music, they “hear” very different things. The same sensory information is perceived, but for the musician, who can pick out bass lines separately from treble melodies, for example, or who recognizes the importance of key changes and time signatures, the experience is informed by these discursive constructions of traditional music theory. But is one experience “better?” More “pure?” More “informed?” Some musicians might say that they can better “appreciate” music because of this discursive knowledge. But might a musician’s constant discursive enmeshment also hinder their ability to hear the unexpected? Might it restrict their creativity in composing music of their own? Is the experience of listening to music when one is not a musician somehow more “free” in that it remains unbound by discursive expectation? Perhaps, like so much of the beautiful complexity in human life, naming and language can bring both gains and losses to the experience.

Likewise, when women begin to recognize their solitary masturbation experiences as sexual, when they learn names and meanings for their activities, perhaps they both gain and lose something. Lost is the free-floating and unproblematic experience of embodied bliss that characterized girls’ extra-discursive experiences; gained is an awareness that providing oneself with erotic pleasure is called masturbation and is generally considered sexual and taboo. But an additional equation may also exist: Lost is the uninformed and aimless nature of this early erotic exploration; gained is a willful and ambitious curiosity aimed at deliberate exploration and mastery of one’s body. Maybe the question here is not whether the entrance into discourse is unequivocally good or bad. Maybe the question, instead, is how language and discourse can be both restrictive and liberatory, and how this can sometimes happen at the same time.
This challenge of language, however, should not deter scholars from exploring life’s most indescribable moments. Considering the extent to which researchers rely on language both to collect data and to think about it, it is important to continue to be critical of how language and naming inform not just individual experiences of embodiment, but also our and our participants’ capacity to discuss it. After all, so many of humans’ most profoundly embodied life experiences are the very ones that seem to resist adequate expression in words – grief, spirituality, injustice, love, self – and the challenges of language should never prevent our quest to understand them.

Willful Subjectivity and the Relentless Pursuit of Embodied Knowledge

My goal in this dissertation was to better understand how the forces of social power intersected with the forces of embodied knowledge to co-construct women’s solitary masturbation experiences. One of the most enduring and unmistakable findings I have emphasized throughout this dissertation has been that even within a social context that stigmatizes women’s solitary masturbation, the women I spoke to narrated a persistent curiosity and an adamant resolve to understand their own bodies and pleasures. They sought knowledge from within. The women in my sample consistently demonstrated a willful subjectivity (Ahmed, 2014) – they insisted on what they felt in their bodies, they questioned those ideologies that would silence them, and they refused to ignore their desires.

As I listened to participants, I heard shame and guilt; I heard confusion arising from a lack of information (and/or misinformation) and a culture of silence. But alongside these unhappy experiences, I inevitably heard positive and powerful ones. Women told me about rejecting regulatory discourses in favor of embodied delight: As Raisin (Filipino American, Lesbian, 30) said, regarding the religious proscriptions she was taught, “Once you get off, you’re
just like ‘Fuck that.’” I heard tales of bold curiosity and tenacious embodied exploration: Cici (White, Straight, 30), for instance, called her erotic self-discovery “very ambitious.” I heard women refuse to confine their masturbation imaginary (i.e., their conceptualizations of what masturbation can be), dismissing the stigmas of society and instead relying on their own bodies: As Amelia (Black/African American, Straight, 26) exclaimed regarding her masturbation methods, “It’s right if it feels good to me when I’m doing it!” A few women even detailed to me how masturbating had given them renewed confidence, and in some cases, changed their lives: As Free@30 (Black, No Label, 34) explained, “Once I got to the point where I was comfortable with myself, then I was like, ‘Oh, no. A lot of this [negativity in my life] has to change. … What is, like, the big vibrator?’”

My findings suggest that the social stigmatization of women’s solitary masturbation — and all of the complementary discourses that work to uphold it — informs women’s experiences, but importantly, does not determine them. These women’s parents and teachers were often silent about masturbation, and childhood friends were often silencing, but women still masturbated. Masturbation was socially constructed as off-limits, dangerous, immoral, and pathological, but women still masturbated. These women remained undeterred, and in some cases seemed even incited, by oppressive social norms, and they consistently listened to what they felt in their bodies as the compass guiding them forward. Knowing that they were not “supposed to talk about” masturbation (Jane, Black, Heterosexual, 31), these women nevertheless explored their deepest yearnings. They tried and hesitated and tried again. They overcame their uncertainty and discouragement by relentlessly inquiring within. Their bodies were their source of knowledge, the truth against which all competing knowledges were compared.
Perhaps there is a liminal space between oppression and liberation; a space of desire, titillation, curiosity, and defiance. Perhaps there is something seductive about forbidden pleasures, something alluring about the “danger” of unbridled euphoria, something gratifying about disobedience. Beyond the confusion these women feel about masturbation in a context of so much silence, I wonder whether this silence also creates an aura of mystery that begs to be explored. Like a dusty chest stashed in the back of an attic, maybe the neglected and hidden nature of masturbation makes it all the more enticing. Perhaps mastery of one’s own embodied pleasures appears as a sort of challenge to be undertaken in the face of social scorn and denial of women’s desires. Perhaps women hunger for self-pleasure not just because it feels good but also because it is counter-normative. Perhaps learning about one’s body – recognizing its capacities, scrutinizing its idiosyncrasies, and encouraging its limitless expressions – is not only an act of will, but also an act of pleasure itself. Indeed, though women told me stories of hesitation, uncertainty and dismay, they also relayed how their willful pursuits of knowledge about their bodies and from their bodies made them confident and proud. They explained how they developed a better sense of themselves, both sexually and socially. And whatever (multiple) role(s) stigmatizing discourses may have played in their journeys, these women seemed utterly and enduringly committed to finding their road to ecstasy (Nash, 2014).

Having found that, despite the stigma surrounding women’s solitary sexuality, these women are extraordinarily resilient and strong, I wonder how researchers might take up Jennifer Nash’s (2014) call for explorations of ecstasy rather than merely the “wound?” How might researchers refine their inquiries so as to pay particular attention to those messy instances of both-and (see, e.g., Tolman & McClelland, 2011); both oppression and resistance, both confusion and curiosity, both guilt and pleasure, both gains and losses, both docility and will
(Ahmed, 2014; Foucault, 1977). I wonder how men and boys compare to women and girls in the ways that they follow their bodies toward knowledge? How do they construct their masturbation imaginary? How does their privileged social location alongside the challenging mandates of masculinity inform their experiences of self-eroticism, and how do the intersections of their gender with other social locations like race and sexual orientation factor in? Researchers should strive, in all examinations of the effects of social power on women’s experiences, to illuminate those exquisite examples of power and agency. Though pointing out structural inequalities and hegemonic ideologies is crucial in working toward social justice, so too is recognizing the fortitude of humanity, the drive toward dignity, the pursuit of one’s rights as a person on this Earth. These moments are the fissures that can, over time, shatter the most rigid of ideologies and structures. We cannot afford to ignore them.

**Limitations**

Though this dissertation makes important contributions, several limitations warrant acknowledgement. All recruitment materials indicated that the study would investigate thoughts and opinions about sexuality. Thus, only women who would feel comfortable discussing topics relating to sexuality would have responded to a recruitment email or flyer for such a study. Indeed, as demonstrated in Table 2, the sample contains an overrepresentation of women who are unaffiliated with a religion (20.0% Agnostic, 23.3% Atheist, and 36.7% Spiritual but not religious), and women who identify their political views as liberal (70.0% chose 1 or 2 on a 7-point likert scale). Furthermore, the study took place in the traditionally liberal-minded urban center of New York City (Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014) among women who all had
completed (at least) a bachelor’s degree. These sample characteristics indicate that the data collected from the women in the final sample are unlikely to be representative of the perspectives and experiences of all American women. In particular, because the women in my sample were so educated, they may have had greater access to feminist discourses and/or scientific discourses that challenge the dominant social stigmatization of women’s solitary masturbation.

Nevertheless, the sample remains diverse in terms of other important variables such as race (50.0% White) and sexual orientation (66.7% Heterosexual), and the age range for this sample is also slightly older than much psychological research on sexuality (Mean age = 30, Range = 24-41). Therefore, although my sample may contain participants who hold more liberal sexual attitudes, a common critique of sexuality research (e.g. Wiederman, 1999), the sample is also diverse along demographics such as race and sexual orientation, and, as evidenced throughout this dissertation, the women in my sample varied a great deal in terms of their sexual experiences and attitudes.

In the case of women who had participated in the initial survey study or who had seen the paper I published about that study (Bowman, 2014), these women may have been aware that the study was about masturbation (not just sexuality) before agreeing to participate. Likewise, women who were recruited using the snowball method may have heard from their friends what the study was about before consenting. Though it is not necessarily problematic that participants may have known that the study would be about masturbation, this could have primed some participants and not others. That is, some women may have had an opportunity to think about

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29 The homogeneity of the sample in terms of education was unintentional; I did not attempt to recruit women with any particular level of education.
their masturbation a little bit before participating in the study, while others may have started thinking deeply about their masturbation only during the interview itself.

My identities and social positions may also have implications for how participants felt talking to me about their experiences and how I was able to understand and interpret those experiences. Though many women incorporated information about their culture, religion, race, sexual orientation, and social class into their narratives, and though they all seemed relatively comfortable talking with me, my whiteness alongside other presumed statuses (e.g. as a PhD student and researcher; as a woman with a feminine gender presentation, which often leads people to assume, incorrectly, that I am heterosexual) may have made it more difficult for women of color to talk about race with me, for example, or for sexual minority women to talk about sexual orientation with me. My positionality may also have influenced my ability to “hear” the nuances of experiences that are different from my own and to interpret those experiences in contexts that differ from my own. For example, though I specifically searched for racialized patterns in my data, I found none. In listening very closely to participants’ narratives through a critical lens, I did find little moments of possible racial analyses, but these were also few and far between (possibly due to the fact that I did not ask participants about their race, and that women of color may not have brought race explicitly into the room because they were talking to me, a white woman). Similarly, I didn’t find any patterns of difference between straight women and queer women. I attempted to ameliorate this limitation by being intentional in my efforts to listen to what participants were saying to me while simultaneously holding in my mind the critical theories of race and sexuality that have been demonstrated to be pertinent to women’s sexual experiences.
Final Thoughts on the Journey Home

As a woman journeys through her solitary sexual life she learns things, knows things, unlearns things, questions things and constructs again and again a roadmap for herself to navigate the treacherous landscape of competing messages. She smiles softly as she provides herself with a pleasurable sensation in her body, but discourses and ideologies lurk in the shadows like a pack of thieves, ready to pull her away from the knowledge and power that resides within her – in her Body – and replace her confidence with uncertainty. Achievement, always the charmer, glides in to suggest that her empowerment is right around the next corner – if only she would work a little bit harder. “You could be a better version of yourself,” he whispers, “more skilled, more pleasured, more like other women.” Suddenly the definite pleasure that felt so good to the woman a minute ago is up for debate – Is this the right sensation? Is my method correct? Am I normal? Is something wrong with me? – But the figure has vanished, leaving only his mandates in his wake; he is not here to answer questions. As if on cue, the clever twins, Morality and Excess, slink in to have their say. “It’s not right,” sniffs Morality, and Excess nods in agreement, “I think you’re addicted. Before you know it, you’ll be a full-fledged whore, damaged and unlovable.” The pleasure is even fainter now, receding in the woman’s mind behind a host of new concerns – Is this wrong? Could I hurt myself? Could I hurt someone else? What does it mean? – But as she opens her mouth to ask, the figures have disappeared again like cowards; they are not here to offer clarity, only judgment.

Disoriented, the woman surveys the grounds. What should I do? How do I know? She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes for a moment. Looking inward, she feels something. It isn’t much at first – a muffled warmth, a faint tingle, a quiet longing – but it is definitely there. To her amazement, she sees that her sensations are persistent, volatile and vast, refusing to be
dominated. Her pleasure may have been overwhelmed briefly by devious social norms, but it lives on, resilient in the face of oppression. She focuses closely on what her Body is telling her. “I am here,” her Body gently insists, “I have always been here and I always will be. Listen closely, and you will find your way.” The woman smiles to herself again, exploring what she feels, trying new things and becoming more confident, defying the pack of thieves and letting go of their toxic messages. As she reclaims her pleasure and listens to her sensations, she realizes that she is no longer confused. Every now and then the thieves show themselves, threatening fear and loneliness and regret, but she has learned how to handle them now. Closing her eyes, she listens to her embodied wisdom. *So this is it,* she thinks to herself, grinning with pride, *this is how I know.*

I began this dissertation by acknowledging the challenges of subjectivity. As social beings, people inevitably balance the mandates of social norms and their own internal sense of power and will. I also pointed to the important role of embodied sensation in people’s understandings of themselves, and suggested, like Audre Lorde, that such “feelings” can be “the most genuine paths to knowledge.” Reflecting on the words of the women who graciously shared their experiences with me, I notice that they echo these truths. These women narrated diverse and complicated journeys through the surprisingly social phenomenon of solitary masturbation, and let their bodies lead the way. They seemed to learn, gradually over time, through trial and error and enthusiastic exploration that however confusing the world around them might be, they could trust what they felt in their bodies. And while they, like all people, continued to maneuver themselves within precarious discursive terrains, they found a sense of understanding and a sense of self through their embodied wisdom. By listening within, they found their way home.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Income</th>
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<th>Religiosity</th>
<th>PO</th>
<th>Education</th>
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<th>Recruit</th>
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<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>PO</td>
<td>Education</td>
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</table>

*Note. All names are pseudonyms provided by participants. Participants who chose the same name as another participant have a “2” following their chosen pseudonym. Age is in years. Race and Sexual Orientation were written in by participants, and are presented in the format in which participants reported them. Income was measured through a checklist of ranges, and is yearly household income measured in thousands of dollars. Religion was measured through a checklist, and any additional written-in information (including information provided in the space after “other”) from participants is presented here in quotation marks. Religiosity was measured with the single item, “How important is religion in your life?” and three responses were provided: 1 = Not at all Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Very Important. PO = Political Orientation, and was measured on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = Very Liberal to 7 = Very Conservative. Education was measured using a checklist, and abbreviations are as follows: M = Master’s degree, 4YD = Four-Year College Degree (other options were provided, but no participants checked any of the other options). Relationship status was measured using a checklist, and abbreviations are as follows: M = Married, SNM = Single never married, D = Divorced, STR = Short-Term Relationship (less than one year), LTR = Long-Term Relationship (more than one year), LWP = Living with Partner, NLWP = Not Living with Partner. Recruit = Recruitment Strategy and indicates whether participants were recruited via the previous survey study (“Survey”) or other methods (“Other”) including snowball sampling and professional/personal networking. Any additional notes from me are indicated with “PI” and are in italics.*
Table 2. Participant Demographics

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Note. Percentages for race, sexual orientation, religion, and relationship status may not add up to 100% because participants could choose or write in more than one response. For relationship status, STR = Short-Term Relationship (less than one year), LTR = Long-Term Relationship (more than one year), LWP = Living with Partner, NLWP = Not Living with Partner.
Appendix 1. Recruitment Emails

Initial Email

Subject: Are you still interested in being interviewed for sexuality research?

Hello there,

My name is Christin Bowman and I am a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center studying Social Psychology. With my advisor, Dr. Deborah Tolman, I conduct research aimed at better understanding women’s sexual behaviors and attitudes.

You participated in a study I conducted a few years ago, in 2011. In that study, you filled out an online survey about yourself, your experiences, and your opinions about sexuality and sexual behavior. I want to take a second and thank you so much for your participation in that study! Because of your participation and the participation of hundreds of other women, I have published a peer-reviewed article in the journal, Psychology of Women Quarterly. I am happy to send you a copy of that article if you are interested.

I am emailing you today to find out whether you are still interested in being interviewed for a follow-up study I am conducting. When you participated in my survey in 2011, you indicated that you would like to be contacted in the future about a possible interview, and you provided your email address. I am now ready to conduct those interviews, and would love the opportunity to talk to you. Please note that you are in no way obligated to participate in an interview.

I am planning to interview about 20-40 women in the New York City metro area. If you decide to participate in this interview, I will ask you about your experiences and attitudes toward women’s sexuality, and will talk to you for 1-2 hours in a private office in Manhattan (or, if you prefer, at another location of your choosing). Talking about such personal things could make you feel uncomfortable, but this discomfort should be similar to what you might feel talking to friends about personal things, and you may of course choose not to talk about anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. You will also receive a $30 Amazon gift card as compensation for participation.

If this sounds like something you may be interested in, I am happy to provide more information. Please feel free to email me back with any questions or concerns.

This study has been approved by CUNY’s Institutional Review Board (which ensures that research with human participants is ethical): # 294142-4.
Thank you again for your participation in my research in 2011. I hope to hear back from you soon about whether you would like a copy of my published article, and/or whether you would like to participate in an interview.

All the best,
Christin Bowman

Follow Up Email

Subject: Following up: Would you still like to be interviewed?

Hello there,

I contacted you a few weeks ago, but since I didn’t hear back from you, I thought I would reach out again.

My name is Christin Bowman and I am a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center studying Social Psychology. With my advisor, Dr. Deborah Tolman, I conduct research aimed at better understanding women’s sexual behaviors and attitudes.

You participated in a study I conducted a few years ago, in 2011. In that study, you filled out an online survey about yourself, your experiences, and your opinions about sexuality and sexual behavior. I want to take a second and thank you so much for your participation in that study! Because of your participation and the participation of hundreds of other women, I have published a peer-reviewed article in the journal, Psychology of Women Quarterly. I am happy to send you a copy of that article if you are interested.

I am emailing you today to find out whether you are still interested in being interviewed for a follow-up study I am conducting. When you participated in my survey in 2011, you indicated that you would like to be contacted in the future about a possible interview, and you provided your email address. I am now ready to conduct those interviews, and would love the opportunity to talk to you. Please note that you are in no way obligated to participate in an interview.

I am planning to interview about 30 women in the New York City metro area. If you decide to participate in this interview, I will ask you about your experiences and attitudes toward women’s sexuality, and will talk to you for about an hour in a private office in Manhattan (or, if you prefer, at another location of your choosing). Talking about such personal things could make you feel uncomfortable, but this discomfort should be similar to what you might feel talking to friends about personal things, and you may of course choose not to talk about anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. You will also receive a $30 Amazon gift card as compensation for participation.

If this sounds like something you may be interested in, I am happy to provide more information. Please feel free to email me back with any questions or concerns.
This study has been approved by CUNY’s Institutional Review Board (which ensures that research with human participants is ethical): # 294142-4.

Thank you again for your participation in my research in 2011. I hope to hear back from you soon about whether you would like a copy of my published article, and/or whether you would like to participate in an interview.

All the best,
Christin Bowman
PARTICIPATE IN

SEXUALITY RESEARCH!

Women who are 25-35 years old, of all backgrounds, living in the New York City metro area can participate, and we hope to get about 20-40 responses.

My name is Christin Bowman and I am a researcher at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). I am conducting a study to improve our understanding about women’s sexual behaviors and feelings.

The study involves being interviewed about your experiences and opinions, which will take between 1-2 hours of your time. All responses will be completely confidential. To thank you for your participation, you will be given a $30 Amazon gift card.

If you would like to participate, or have any questions, please email:

CBOWMAN@GRADCENTER.CUNY.EDU

Thank You!
Appendix 3. Demographic Survey

Fake Name: ____________________________________________

Information About You

1. Please provide your date of birth (MM/DD/YYYY):
   __________________________________________

2. How would you identify your race? (you can list as many as you like)
   __________________________________________

3. How would you identify your sexual orientation?
   __________________________________________

4. What is your yearly household income (this includes your income and the income of others who live in your household with you)?

   ( ) Less than $10,000
   ( ) $10,000-$19,999
   ( ) $20,000-$29,999
   ( ) $30,000-$39,999
   ( ) $40,000-$49,999
   ( ) $50,000-$59,999
   ( ) $60,000-$69,999
   ( ) $70,000-$79,999
   ( ) $80,000-$89,999
   ( ) $90,000-$99,999
   ( ) $100,000-$150,000
   ( ) Greater than $150,000

5. Which of the following best describes your religion (or lack of religion)?

   ( ) Catholic
   ( ) Protestant
   ( ) Jewish
   ( ) Muslim
   ( ) Hindu
   ( ) Buddhist
   ( ) Atheist
   ( ) Agnostic
   ( ) Spiritual but not religious
   ( ) Other __________________________________________
   ( ) None of the above
6. How important is religion in your life?
( ) Not at all important
( ) Somewhat important
( ) Very important

7. How would you define your political views?

![Political views scale]

8. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
( ) Less than high school
( ) High school/GED
( ) Some college
( ) 2-year college degree (Associates)
( ) 4-year college degree (BA, BS)
( ) Master's degree
( ) Doctoral degree
( ) Professional degree (JD, MD)

9. Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?
(select all that apply)
( ) Single, Never Married
( ) In a short-term relationship (less than one year), and not living with partner
( ) In a short-term relationship (less than one year), and living with partner
( ) In a long-term relationship (one year or longer), and not living with partner
( ) In a long-term relationship (one year or longer), and living with partner
( ) Married
( ) Domestic Partner/Civil Union
( ) Separated
( ) Divorced
( ) Widowed
## Appendix 4. List of Cards Used in Card Sorting Task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Valence</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbation is a good tension release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbation is mostly about pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbation can help people learn about their bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbation is a good way to improve your sex life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>People masturbate mainly for orgasms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>There are a lot of good reasons to masturbate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbating feels great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbation is relaxing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Masturbation is something to do if you’re bored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>It is possible for a woman to feel like masturbating and feel like not masturbating at the same time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>The media (e.g., magazines, TV) pressures women to masturbate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>The only time a woman really needs to masturbate is if she doesn’t have a current sexual partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Even if they don’t say so out loud, most women like masturbating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbating can make a woman feel sexy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbating is a way of asserting independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>The more a woman masturbates, the better she feels about her body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbation is empowering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbation is often a very routine part of a woman’s life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Masturbation can be frustrating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Most women would be disappointed if they didn’t have an orgasm when they masturbate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>No one would ever want to be caught masturbating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Women should feel guilty if they masturbate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Women should be ashamed if they get turned on by disturbing thoughts when they masturbate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Women should be ashamed if they get turned on by disturbing thoughts when they masturbate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>God is watching women when they masturbate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbation is a perfectly healthy behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Kids should be taught in school that it’s okay to masturbate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Parents should tell their kids that masturbation is normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Masturbation is important for a person’s sexual health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Masturbation is gross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Women who masturbate should learn some self-control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>It’s more normal for men to masturbate than women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Masturbation is something desperate women do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>God doesn’t approve of masturbation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Masturbation is a sign of loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 5. Distribution Grid for Card Sorting Task

**What are your thoughts and feelings about women’s masturbation?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3 cards</th>
<th>5 cards</th>
<th>7 cards</th>
<th>8 cards</th>
<th>8 cards</th>
<th>8 cards</th>
<th>7 cards</th>
<th>5 cards</th>
<th>3 cards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most</strong></td>
<td><strong>Highly</strong></td>
<td><strong>Somewhat</strong></td>
<td><strong>Slightly</strong></td>
<td><strong>Neutral</strong></td>
<td><strong>Slightly</strong></td>
<td><strong>Somewhat</strong></td>
<td><strong>Highly</strong></td>
<td><strong>Most</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| | | | | | | | | |
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| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |

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Appendix 6. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Let’s start by talking about ways you might have heard about or learned about masturbation. How do you remember first hearing about or learning about masturbation?

- What were those experiences like?
- What did you think about that at the time?
- What do you think about that now?

What kinds of messages do you think women receive about masturbation from our society?

- What do you think about those messages?

Can you remember the first time you masturbated? [If yes, continue. If no, ask about one of the first times she can remember.]

- Can you tell me a story about that first time?
  - [General prompts below]

How do you think masturbation is different/similar from sexual experiences with another person?

- Possible suggestions: Pleasure? Orgasms? Confidence? Shame?
- Are there any other ways you can think of that your masturbation might be related to your partnered sexual experiences?
- Do you think masturbation has affected your partnered sexual relationships? If so, how?

Do you ever imagine things in your head while you’re masturbating?

- Can you tell me a story about a time you imagined something while you masturbated?

Does pornography play a role in your masturbation? Have you ever read something that played a role in your masturbation (erotica, romance novels, magazines…)?

- Can you tell me about a time when you looked at pornography/read erotica?
  - [General prompts below]

How do you know when you’re “done” masturbating?

Can you tell me a story about a time when you had a really great experience masturbating?

- What made it so enjoyable?
  - [General prompts below]

Can you tell me a story about a time when you tried something new when you masturbated?

- Why did you try it?
- What was it like?
  - [General prompts below]

Has masturbation ever surprised you? Can you tell me a story about that?

- [General prompts below]
Can you tell me a story about a time when you had a negative experience masturbating?  
  •  [General prompts below]

What about getting caught or worrying about getting caught? Is that something that you’ve experienced?  
  •  Can you tell me about that?  
  •  Who were you concerned would/did catch you?  
    •  [General prompts below]

Have you ever talked about masturbation with a sexual partner?  
  •  What did you talk about?  
  •  How did it make you feel? / What do you think about that?  
    •  [General prompts below]

Have/do you ever want to masturbate, but don’t actually do it? Can you tell me about that?  
Have/do you ever not want to masturbate, but do it anyway? Can you tell me about that?  
  •  Have you ever felt pressure to masturbate?  
    •  [General prompts below]

Has masturbation ever felt risky or dangerous to you? Can you tell me about that?  
  •  [General prompts below]

Do you think your solo masturbation has changed much throughout your life?  
  •  Can you tell me about that?

Is there anything else about your masturbation experiences or sexual experiences you think I should know?  
  •  Is there anything else you think I should have asked?

I have asked you a ton of questions, and you have been so helpful. Thank you very much!  
  •  What was this interview like for you?  
  •  Do you have any questions for me?

General prompts for most of the questions eliciting narratives about specific times masturbating (additional specific prompts are listed under individual questions):  
  •  Pretend that you are giving me the “movie” version of this story.  
  •  What happened? (e.g., How old were you? Where were you?)  
  •  What motivated you?  
  •  What was going through your mind at the time?  
  •  What do you think about that now?
References


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