

Fighting for Pleasure and Questioning Norms

Young Dutch Women's Stories on Sexual Desire and Pleasure

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While writing the conclusion of this study my mind wanders to an evening three years ago, when I visited the information night of the RMA Gender and Ethnicity at Utrecht University together with my mother. I think back of the enthusiasm the RMA sparked in me and of how much I learned ever since. I loved it and hated it. The RMA itself and writing this thesis in particular can be characterized as an incredibly difficult, exhausting and gruesome process with the most amazing feeling at the finish line. I did it; I conquered. Of course, I did not do so all by myself. I had help, a lot of help, from many different people.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction – Sexually Free but Silenced | 1 |
| | |
| 1 Methodology – Gathering Stories | 15 |
| 1.1 Inviting Women | 15 |
| 1.2 The Survey | 17 |
| 1.3 Analysing Stories | 21 |
| 1.4 Influencing Outcomes | 23 |
| 1.5 Ethical Questions | 26 |
| | |
| 2 Repressing Desires | 29 |
| 2.1 Exploring Stories | 29 |
| 2.2 The Women | 30 |
| 2.3 Ivy | 33 |
| 2.3.1 Desiring Intimacy | 33 |
| 2.3.2 Weird, Dirty and Shameful | 34 |
| 2.4 Noor | 35 |
| 2.4.1 The Importance of Context | 36 |
| 2.4.2 Rape Myth | 37 |
| 2.5 Heather | 40 |
| 2.5.1 Good Stories | 40 |
| 2.5.2 Social Fears | 41 |
| 2.6 Madelyn | 42 |
| 2.6.1 Discovering Pleasure | 43 |
| 2.6.2 Body Image | 43 |
| 2.7 <i>Concluding Remarks</i> | 46 |
| | |
| 3 Questioning Norms | 49 |
| 3.1 Saar | 49 |
| 3.1.1 Realistic Body Image | 50 |
| 3.1.2 Decreasing Desire | 52 |
| 3.1.3 Over and Covert Norms | 53 |
| 3.2 Alex | 53 |
| 3.2.1 Fulfilling Fantasies | 54 |
| 3.2.2 Discovering Subcultures | 54 |
| 3.3 Simone | 55 |
| 3.3.1 Masturbation | 56 |
| 3.3.2 Switching of Senses | 57 |

| | | |
|----------|---|-----------|
| 3.3.3 | Vibrating Belly | 58 |
| 3.4 | Ruby | 59 |
| 3.4.1 | Pain | 59 |
| 3.4.2 | Developing a Sexual Self | 60 |
| 3.4.3 | Body as Buddy | 63 |
| 3.5 | <i>Concluding Remarks</i> | 63 |
| | | |
| 4 | Narrating Pleasure | 65 |
| | | |
| 4.1 | Chloe | 65 |
| 4.1.1 | Desiring to See | 66 |
| 4.1.2 | Being Sexual | 67 |
| 4.1.3 | Teenage Taboo | 68 |
| 4.2 | Daphne | 69 |
| 4.2.1 | Traditional Mother | 70 |
| 4.2.2 | Daily Life Experiences | 71 |
| 4.2.3 | Body Language | 72 |
| 4.3 | Jasmin | 73 |
| 4.3.1 | Disciplining Power | 73 |
| 4.3.2 | Source of Energy | 74 |
| 4.4 | Hazel | 76 |
| 4.4.1 | Secret Sexuality | 77 |
| 4.4.2 | Women's Orgasm | 78 |
| 4.4.3 | Positive Teaching | 80 |
| 4.5 | <i>Concluding Remarks</i> | 80 |
| | | |
| | Conclusion | 82 |
| | Bibliography | 86 |
| | Appendix 1 Survey | 91 |
| | Appendix 2 Survey Responses Daphne | 94 |

Introduction – Sexually Free but Silenced

Today, men and women are often understood as equally sexually free. At least this is the case when following dominant discourses concerning (female) sexuality (Milnes 2004). Although female sexuality was regulated and controlled in Victorian times, this changed in Western societies since the start of the nineteenth century. These changes are often narrated either as an evolutionary or as a revolutionary process. When considering these changes in evolutionary terms, Victorian regulations were gradually replaced by a more liberal and permissive understanding of sexuality based on autonomy and individual choice (Milnes 2004).

According to the revolutionary narrative these changes did not occur gradually, but as a result of fights fought by feminists; they fought and overthrew social norms repressing sexuality and thereby they created a sexually free and liberal society (Milnes 2004). While women fought for the right to vote during the first wave of feminism, they fought for economic and sexual liberation during the second wave. In the Netherlands this led to the contraceptive pill becoming available in 1964 and abortion being legalized in 1981; as such sexuality and motherhood were separated. Women gained authority over their own bodies and started developing their sexual selves (Wouters 1995).

Today feminism is often considered as part of the past in the Netherlands; women's emancipation is completed and therefore feminism has become unnecessary (Meulenbelt and Römkens 2015). In line with this idea, the taboos that repressed women's sexuality in the past

are considered to have been broken. This statement can be justified by the pervasive role of sexualized imagery of women in today's media; we continually encounter images of women's sexual and nude bodies in media, which is understood as proving that women's sexuality is no longer repressed or considered taboo.

However, when considering the intrinsic messages of this imagery it becomes apparent this conclusion is too simplistic (Milnes 2004). While some aspects of women's sexuality and pleasure are commodified, others remain repressed (Jolly et al 2013); while women's bodies are sexualized and women are taught to be sexy, their own sexual desires, feelings and needs are silenced. Although the processes of evolution and revolution have increased women's ability to develop their sexual selves, the level of freedom women have and experience in choosing the sexual encounters and relationships they desire can be questioned (Milnes 2004, 153).

The double standard concerning sexuality for boys and girls results in different routes to sexual maturity (Tolman 2005[2002]). Before the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century sex was not aimed at allowing women to experience sexual pleasure, because this would jeopardise men's control of their posterity (Vanwesenbeeck 2011). This stance resulted in the persisting cultural norm that 'good' women's sexuality is fundamentally reticent, subservient and vulnerable. The double standard that still influences contemporary society assumes that sexual desire is inherently male and active, while women's role is to be the tempting, passive object (idem).

In effect, girls and women are meant to be desirable but are not allowed to desire, meaning that they have to be sexy without being sluts. As a result of these norms, engaging in (casual) sexual encounters can have negative consequences for girls and women (Milnes 2004). Not only do women and girls risk physical consequences such as pregnancy and contracting sexually transmitted diseases, they also risk important social consequences, including being labelled as 'slut' or 'bad girl' (Tolman 2005[2002]). While such risks of having sex loom large for girls, having (casual) sex is tolerated for boys and men (Milnes 2004). In this discourse characterised by a double standard and contradictory messages, girls and women are to develop a healthy sexual self.

Developing a healthy sexual self is so important because sex is one of the core elements of life. It is not only important for reproduction and thereby for sustaining human life, it is also a means to fulfil human needs by allowing for instance for closeness, pleasure and love (Rutgers Nisso Groep 2009). In order to develop a healthy sexual self, girls and women must have the opportunity to develop their sexual subjectivity. This involves, among other things, developing one's identity as sexual being and understanding oneself as entitled to sexual pleasure (Tolman 2005)¹. Sexual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity, since knowing one's sexual desires is

¹ This term will be elaborated upon in the next section, 'Women's Sexuality Reseached'.

“a route to knowing, to being, oneself through the process of relationship” (idem, 21).

Unfortunately the development of this sexual subjectivity is hindered by the double standard. During adolescence the double standard negatively influences girls ability to develop their autonomy, subjectivity and assertiveness. Instead, girls are stimulated to develop themselves as (sexy) objects and not as (sexual) subjects (Vanwesenbeeck 2011). Altogether, girls’ development of intimacy and identity is hindered by the contemporary societal discourse that simultaneously commodifies aspects of women’s sexuality by enforcing their desirability and sexiness *and* silences women’s sexual desires and pleasures.

Many have argued that women’s stories of desire have been silenced and marginalized, both in mainstream culture and in academics². Consequentially, it can be argued that within this discursive reality some stories are omnipresent while others are silenced. It is almost as if stories holding positive power (*potentia*) are silenced, while stories holding repressive power (*potestas*) are not³. Norms prevent that stories about girls’ and women’s desire are being told. Sexual desire is a positive and enabling aspect of sexuality because it allows for the development of a healthy sexual self. Considering this, it is relevant to ask women about their sexual desires and pleasures and to engage with *their* stories and experiences. What happens when women are asked to discuss topics that are generally silenced?

In the present study I explore young Dutch women’s narrations of sexual desires and pleasures. Being located in the Netherlands, I wonder how young women in the Dutch context experience, engage with and narrate such stories and how social conventions, silences and the double standard are part of that. Throughout this study I will respond to the following research question:

- ❖ How do young Dutch women narrate their sexual desires and pleasures in a discursive reality that silences such experiences?

In order to answer this question, the following subquestions will be explored:

- ❖ What experiences do women share about sexual desire and pleasure when given the space to share their stories in an anonymous online questionnaire?
- ❖ How do repressive and positive power give shape to their stories? How do women represent social norms and taboos in their narrations? Which norms and taboos can be defined and what role do they play?
- ❖ How do women respond to those silences? What discursive strategies do they call upon?

² See for instance Thompson (1990), Milnes (2004), Fine (2005), Tolman (2012), Dubberley (2013).

³ The terms repressive (*potestas*) and positive (*potentia*) power will be further explored in this chapter in the section ‘Repressing Desires’.

These questions are explored by gathering and analysing the stories of women themselves. By means of a call for participants on Facebook, Dutch women were invited to respond to an online survey about women's sexuality, encompassing 12 questions concerning their experiences with (the development of) their sexuality, sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy. Of all women that responded to the survey, the stories of 12 women aged between 21 and 31 were focused on in the analysis of this study⁴. These women's narratives were analysed by means of discourse analysis.

Often women are considered as victims in research focusing on women's sexuality (Vanwesenbeeck 2011). In this research, my aim is to allow women to speak their minds and tell their stories, to hear how they experience sexual desire and pleasure and the norms controlling these experiences. In doing so my intention is not to see them as victims but as women taking control and having power over their own sexuality. I want to explore how they develop their sexual selves and how they engage with repressive norms hindering that development, not as victims but as victors. An underlying goal of my research is to reveal repressive norms guiding their stories, because "[b]y revealing norms, we can subvert them, as it is precisely because they are often not visible that norms have such a powerful hold on us" (Jolly et al 2013, 13). In order to contribute to this incentive, women's stories are engaged with and the silences within them are uncovered.

Before discussing the methodology and analysing the women's stories that were gathered, I will explore previous research that was conducted in the field of girls' and women's sexuality on which this study is build.

Women's Sexuality Researched

Girls' and women's sexuality has been an important research topic for some time now. The debate started in the United States when Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Kinsey 1953), a study concerning female sexuality that followed *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Kinsey 1948). This work presented results as derived from interviews with 6000 women, concerning the incidence and frequency of specific sexual activities and their relation to social categories such as age and religion. Some years later William Masters and Virginia Johnson published *Human Sexual Response*; they researched 700 people's sexual responses by direct observation in laboratory settings and dispelled misconceptions regarding female sexual arousal and orgasm (Masters and Johnson 1966). Shere Hite published *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality*; she asked 3000 women aged between 14 and 78 to describe in their own

⁴ Both the process of choosing and the method of analysis will be discussed in chapter 1 'Methodology'.

words how they feel, what they like and what they think about sex (Hite 1976).

These American publications influenced the Dutch context. The findings of those studies were known in the Netherlands and influenced people's ideas of sexuality. For instance, Kinsey's work (1953) caused people to question the sexual standards of the younger generation; one of the questions that arose was whether adolescents were having sex before marriage (RutgersWPF.nl). At the time there was a growing need for research concerning sexuality in the Dutch context. Consequentially, Dutch mainstream women's magazine *Margriet*, published 'Sex in the Netherlands'⁵ in 1969. Also, the government funded the founding of a research institute for social sexuological research, NISSO. Today the main institute for research on sexuality is RutgersWPF, a leading institution and knowledge centre specializing in sexuality. One of their objectives is to conduct demographical research on topics related to sexuality in the Netherlands in order to gain insight in and monitor people's sexual and reproductive health (Rutgers Nisso Groep 2009).

In the larger Western context, research concerning girls' sexuality did not specifically focus on sexual desire and pleasure until Michelle Fine identified this research gap (Fine 1988); she discussed the 'missing discourse of desires' and argued that sex education lacked information concerning the pleasurable aspects of sex. Rather, the focus in classrooms was on a discourse of violence, victimization and individual morality, instead of on a discourse of desire. Sharon Thompson coined the term 'pleasure narrators' and argued that there is a growing minority of girls who developed a sexual subjectivity focusing on pleasure (Thompson 1990). These girls had advantages over others: they for instance had explored their sexuality as girls, had masturbated as girls, were raised by empowered mothers, and/or had experienced petting before having intercourse. These advantages had resulted in the development of a positive and pleasure focused sexual self. For these girls "the body is a treasure chest that they take with them" (idem, 351).

These publications led to a turning point as the focus in research shifted to "the recognition and articulation of questions about the possibilities of girls' desire, pleasure and sexual subjectivity" (Tolman 2012, 748). Deborah Tolman responded by asking girls about their experiences of sexual desire, for instance in *Dilemmas of Desire. Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (Tolman 2005). In this work Tolman puts forwards how boys and girls are socialized differently and how this has consequences for both boys' and girls' sexual development. Tolman focuses on girls and argues that girls' sexuality has effectively been desexualized; instead of desiring sexual feelings in their bodies, girls have learned to desire emotional connections and relationship. For girls it is not socially acceptable to have sexual desires; their role is to be sexy for boys while not experiencing sexual feelings of their own. Girls "need to be protected *from*

⁵ "Sex in Nederland".

boys while also being available *for boys*” (Tolman 2005, 5).

These social expectations have dire consequences for girls’ sexual development. As discussed before it hinders girls’ development of identity and intimacy by disallowing for a healthy development of autonomy, assertiveness and subjectivity. At stake are their experiences of sexual pleasure, but also their health in general and their general ability to act in the world (Vanwesenbeeck 2011). In practice, the double standard for instance results in girls’ adoption of the ‘it just happened’ script (Tolman 2005). As girls are not allowed to have sexual desires, it is difficult for them to make sense of circumstances that imply such feelings. Consequentially, girls tend to explain their sexual encounters by stating ‘it just happened’. According to Tolman this is one of few acceptable ways for making sense and describing their experiences; girls need a cover story because desiring sex and being a good girl cannot coexist. This ‘it just happened’ script is “a story about desire. (...) It is also a story that covers over active choice, agency, and responsibility, which serves to “disappear” desire, in the telling and in the living” (Tolman 2005, 2). As such, Tolman argues that this script is both unsafe and unhealthy. She points at how girls’ sexuality is often considered in negative terms:

“Sexuality is so often thought of only in negative terms, so frequently clustered with problem behaviors such as smoking and drinking, in our minds as well as in research, that it is easy to forget that while we are not supposed to become smokers or drinkers in adolescence, we are supposed to develop a mature sense of ourselves as sexual beings by the time we have reached adulthood.” (Tolman 2005, 3-4).

Because of this focus girls do not receive many positive messages about their sexuality. In this context, I argue negative messages can be understood as messages which are informed by the double standard. They are messages that support the double standard and thereby result in hindering the sexual development of girls. Positive messages, on the other hand, are messages that are more pleasure focused and allow for/stimulate the development of a healthy sexual self. A woman with a healthy sexual self can be understood as a woman who has been able to develop her sexual subjectivity in a healthy way. This sexual subjectivity can be defined as:

“a person’s experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being. Sexual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity.” (Tolman 2005, 6).

Following this, developing a healthy sexual subjectivity involves knowing your sexual desire and being able to understand yourself as sexual being. This is so important because it is an essential element of agency and self-esteem. “That is, one’s sexuality affects her/his ability to act in the world, and to feel like she/he can will things and make them happen” (Karin Martin 1996 in

Tolman 2005, 6). As such, a healthy sexual self enables someone to make responsible decisions; whether a girl decides to engage in certain sexual activities or not and whether she decides to have protected sex or not, depends on whether she was able to develop her sexual subjectivity.

In the above quote it becomes apparent that sexual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity. Tolman's (2005) understanding of desire is anchored in the relational theory as proposed by Brown and Gilligan (1989), developers of the Listening Guide⁶. I follow this definition of desire in the current study. For Tolman, "feeling desire in response to another person is a route to knowing, to being, oneself through the process of relationship" (Tolman 2012, 749). This implicates that sexual desire is at the same time "beyond the boundaries of the body *and* inclusive of it" (idem, emphasis original). Sexual desire is both bodily and embodied; it designates "sexual and pleasurable feelings in and of the body that constitute a form of knowledge about the self, one's relationships and one's cultural contexts or social worlds" (idem). As such, sexual desire is at the heart of life; it allows someone to understand themselves and the world around them, "it is part of the self, a knowing, feeling, experiencing self" (idem). Being able to develop sexual desire is an important aspect of developing sexual subjectivity.

In a discursive reality that is guided by double standard as discussed above, this development is hindered. Because girls are learning to be sexy without having sexual feelings, they are not taught to develop their sexual selves in a healthy way. This is problematic because adolescent girls' understanding of themselves and of the world is clustered with their sexual development (Vanwesenbeeck 2011). As adolescents, girls have to learn how to balance autonomy and intimacy with others. Altogether, sexuality can be seen as a critical component that allows for the development of identity and intimacy. By emphasising their looks instead of feelings, there is no space for girls to get to know themselves, their bodies, desires and pleasures. Because the double standard has such a wide scope of consequences hindering women's development in multiple aspects of life, it is important to research how women make sense of those norms and how those influence their experiences; such is the incentive of this research.

Non-Academic Contributions

Women's sexuality is not only important within academia; several non-academic feminist texts concerning women's sexuality have been very influential in mainstream culture. One of those is *The Beauty Myth* by American feminist writer Naomi Wolf (Wolf 1991). Wolf argues that the double standard restricts girls' sexual development by teaching them not to desire, while it

⁶ The Listening Guide is a narrative methodology for listening to women's voices which will be further elaborated upon in section 1.3 'Analysing Stories'.

allows for sexual imagery of the exact same girls. This imagery is for girls to compare themselves to and for boys to enjoy. One of her arguments is that sexual “explicitness” in itself is not the problem. Encountering sex continuously, through many different media, is not the problem:

“We could use a lot more of that, if explicit meant honest and revealing; if there were a full spectrum of erotic images of uncoerced real women and real men in contexts of sexual trust, beauty pornography could theoretically hurt no one. (...) [However,] the representation is heavily censored. Because we see many versions of the naked Iron Maiden⁷, we are asked to believe that our culture promotes the display of female sexuality. It actually shows almost none. It censors representations of women’s bodies, so that only the official versions are visible” (Wolf 1991, 135-136).

Focusing on beauty and its relation to sex and desire, Wolf argues we need representations of a diverse set of bodies and desiring women, allowing for different women to be beautiful, sexual and desiring. Diversity is censored and only few representations are allowed. Therefore Wolf calls for a diversification of images and stories.

Two other non-academic sources of inspiration for this research are Nancy Friday’s (2013[1973]) and Emily Dubberley’s (2013) work on sexual fantasies. In the early 1970s American writer Nancy Friday had the feeling that “women do fantasize and should be accepted as having the same unrealized desires and needs as men” (Friday 2013, 15). Until then the general opinion was that only men experienced sexual fantasies. Friday started collecting women’s stories because she hoped to prove this wrong. She intended to provide a ‘yardstick’, a ‘sexual rule-of-thumb equivalent’ for women to compare their own fantasies to. By knowing the fantasies of others women could feel empowered, realizing they were not weird, crazy or bad for having sexual fantasies. These stories were published in *My Secret Garden*, consisting of 189 fantasies written by women who filled their stories with “cries for help and sighs of relief” (Friday 2013, 15).

Friday is considered to have started the discussion on female sexual fantasy. She had a major influence on many women, including British journalist Emily Dubberley. In line with Friday’s work Dubberley researched sexual fantasies of today’s women and published her findings in *Garden of Desires. The Evolution of Women’s Sexual Fantasies* (Dubberley 2013). She starts by thanking Friday for planting the first seed and argues that female sexual fantasy did not officially exist before Friday’s publication of *My Secret Garden*.

By collecting female sexual fantasies Friday showed that women have a sexuality of their own, which was “a highly contentious idea in 1973” (Dubberley 2013, 11). Dubberley follows in

⁷ Wolf (1991) describes the Iron Maiden as a German medieval instrument of torture in the shape of a body that encloses a woman inside.

Friday's footsteps because she wants to see 'how the garden has grown' ever since. In doing so she departs from the assumption that although female sexual fantasy is more accepted today than in Friday's time, it is still judged harshly: "History shows us that, to date, female sexual freedom has been very much 'two steps forward, one step back'" (idem, 29). For her the key lies in openly discussing the topic, thereby giving women the power to shape their own stance on sex⁸.

Thus far I have introduced (research on) the societal discourse on sexuality and its consequences for girls and women and their development of a healthy sexual self. Due to the societal discourses focusing on women's sexiness instead of their sexual feelings, the development of their sexual subjectivity is hindered, which has consequences for their general health and wellbeing, self-esteem and agency. As sexual desire is an essential part of sexual subjectivity, this research focuses on this aspect of sexuality.

In this paragraph I have explored how others have put research concerning women's sexuality on the map. Although many questions have been answered by means of this research, these studies also resulted in the formulation of many new questions. This study explores some of those questions and contributes to existing scholarship by engaging with the norms, both overt and covert, which inform the stories that women tell concerning their experiences of sexual pleasures and desires.

Women's Experiences

Apart from defining sexual desire and sexual subjectivity, it is important to engage with my understanding of the term 'women'. Also the above account of women's sexuality results in questions regarding how to understand silences on specific aspects of sexuality. These questions will be engaged hereafter.

It has become apparent that women and men are taught different norms concerning sexuality. This double standard allows men to be sexual and have sexual experiences, while it teaches women to be sexy without desiring sex. But what defines a woman? In this study the term 'woman' is considered as 'cluster concept' (Gatens 2006). A cluster concept consists of multiple elements which together form the concept, without the necessity of all being applicable simultaneously. Following Moira Gatens, the cluster concept 'woman' is compiled of four elements. First, womanhood is attributed on the basis of female sex, including chromosomes, sex

⁸ Neither Friday's (2013[1973]) nor Dubberley's (2013) work is academic and neither claim to be so. Nevertheless, both works are very valuable as they present women's intimate stories in their own words. As such, both works have been important sources of inspiration for this thesis.

characteristics and general morphology. Second, womanhood encompasses specific phenomenological features; feelings related to being woman include both physical feelings such as pain during menstruation and socially produced feelings such as fear of rape. Then, social roles are part of being woman; wearing dresses and being oppressed on the basis of sex are examples. The last element considers 'attribution', meaning that it concerns recognizing oneself and/or being recognized by others as woman. It is about calling oneself and being called a woman.

Considering 'woman' as cluster concept allows for a broad understanding of who can be categorized as women. This definition of womanhood implies that a wide variety of people fall into this category; this could include a person who was born female, recognized as woman by others and by herself. It could also include a person who was born male but understands herself as woman and follows the social roles for womanhood. In this study it is assumed that women are socialized in a way that problematizes the construction of their sexual subjectivity. When relating this to the cluster concept it becomes apparent that all four categories of the cluster cannot easily be distinguished, but instead coexist in complex ways. The social discourse on sexuality could be located in the third category; it can be understood as part of the social roles for women, having to be sexy without being sexual. However, this is always related to phenomenological features. A person that is either attributed by others or herself as woman can experience the repressions and reinforcements related to such social norms, which is related to the feelings of womanhood she might experience. As such, the different components always work together in someone's experience.

This experience cannot be predicted by womanhood alone; the man/woman divide⁹ is not the only point of difference between people. What needs to be taken into account is that there are multiple layers of difference between people. Following Rosi Braidotti's sexual difference theory, there are three layers of difference that coexist in daily life and cannot easily be distinguished (Braidotti 2011). There are differences between men and women, differences among women and differences within each woman. Men and women's experiences concerning social norms might differ, but not every woman is affected in the same way. 'Women' is not a homogenous social group, instead it is an umbrella term. Depending on other social categories such as ethnicity, age, class, (dis-)ability and sexual orientation, women's experiences will differ. Also, each woman is a multiplicity in herself, as she is split and fractured. As Braidotti argues, she is a network of levels of experience, a living memory and embodied genealogy. Not only is she a conscious subject, she is as well subject of her unconscious. She is in an imaginary relationship to social categories, not in a static way, but always in motion (Braidotti 2011, 157).

⁹ This divide itself is problematic as more genders exist than merely 'men' and 'women'.

Each woman's experiences are singular as they depend on her social background and previous experiences. These experiences are never neutral or objective (Scott 1991). Instead experiences are always mediated; events are interpreted and reproduced in communication. The writings that are collected in this study are narratives; women described their mediated and subjective experiences of sexual desire and pleasure.

Repressed Desires

For this study I gather Dutch women's experiences by asking them to narrate their experiences and share their stories of sexual desire and pleasure. The assumption I start from is that societal discourse *is* informed by the double standard as earlier discussed. Consequentially stories about women's sexual desire and pleasure are rare and repressed, while stories that are informed by and/or supportive of the double standard are omnipresent. I wonder what stories women share when there is a space for them to share intimate stories, how they narrate such stories and what role social norms play in their stories. Therefore it is relevant to engage with theory concerning the repression of sexuality.

According to French philosopher Michel Foucault, the main theoretical framework underlying our understanding of modern sexuality is the repressive hypothesis (Foucault 1998[1978]). Foucault argues that discussing sex was normal and socially accepted at the beginning of the seventeenth century; with no need for secrecy and concealment sexual practices were open to discussion. This is supposed to have changed with the rise of the bourgeoisie, when speech on sexuality was confined and silenced. Sexuality was reduced to the function of reproduction and as such moved into the parents' bedroom, with a few exceptions. The brothel and mental hospital became places of tolerance, while in all other places the focus was on taboo, nonexistence and silence. However, as a taboo on speaking about sex was installed, discourses on sex changed and increased, albeit looking different; they became a more essential and important part of society. Because regulations on sex were increasingly restrictive, sex was transformed into discourse and flourished.

The repressive hypothesis has resulted in an intensification of discursive practices concerning sexuality, combined with the experience of taboo and repression. According to Foucault (1998) this repressive hypothesis is perseverant and still shapes our experiences. As sexuality continues to be considered repressed and silenced, breaking the taboo by discussing sexuality remains revolutionary important; as long as there is a taboo concealing stories concerning sexuality, fighting for the sexual cause is legitimized. This sexual cause involves "the demand for sexual freedom, but also for the knowledge to be gained from sex and the right to

speak about it – [which] becomes legitimately associated with the honor of a political cause” (6). The hypothesis upholds the benefit of the speaker; “If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (6). Those who dare to transgress the discursive rules do a brave and honourable job, attempting to bring freedom to the people.

In the repressive hypothesis power is conceived as taking the form of law and demanding obedience; it is repressing sex, it is constraining, oppressive, negative and dominating. It censors sex; it is not permitted and cannot be spoken about. Foucault (1998) critiques this negative conception of power and argues for a more inclusive understanding of power. In his theory power is all-embracing and existing in every relation; it is everywhere and omnipresent, embracing everything and everyone. Instead of being located in individuals or institutions, power is located in discourse, where it not only restricts but also holds potential; power is simultaneously repressive (*potestas*) and productive (*potentia*).

In his work Foucault sets out to analyse the history of sexuality by considering both the repressive and productive moments of power in discourse. He discusses sexuality in general, without focusing on either men or women. Much like Foucault, my study focuses on the workings of power within discourse. More specifically, my focus is on women’s narratives regarding topics that are generally silenced and the workings of social norms within them. I start from the assumption that while positive and enabling aspects are repressed in our discursive reality, negative and repressing aspects of women’s sexuality are not. Norms govern how (women’s) sexuality is considered, and because norms are repressing that which could enable women to develop a healthy subjectivity, this development is problematized. Therefore, while exploring women’s stories I focus on how repressive social norms influence women’s experiences of desires and pleasures, on top of which I explore how women use productive moments of power to develop a sexual subjectivity nevertheless.

My Research Position

This study can be situated under the heading of feminist research. Under this ‘umbrella’ research can be located with different epistemological, methodological and ideological backgrounds (Hesse-Biber 2014). One of the fundamental assumptions they have in common is a rejection of positivist objectivity and the “assertion that “truth” can be multiply defined or understood and that knowledge is political” (Hesse-Biber 2014, 15). In Haraway’s words, “feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*” (Haraway 2003, 27). Situated knowledges allow for feminist objectivity in research, the basis of which involves comprehending that a researcher’s

social location matters. This location is never value-free and replicable, but instead should be acknowledged as partial and limited; it should be accounted for. Consequentially an important aspect of every study is the positioning of the researcher. As a researcher is never a neutral being, their background, both socially and theoretically, influences their project. Therefore it is important to account for my background by introducing my own social and theoretical position.

Similar to many respondents I am a young white Dutch woman in my twenties. I am a research master student and I live with my male partner and his two daughters, aged 9 and 11. I am a feminist whose major interest is in women's sexuality. Although I live a heterosexual life, I experience my sexual orientation as being fluid¹⁰. However, lacking a suitable term to describe my sexual orientation I cannot do any better than describe myself as non-heterosexual.

I grew up feeling like something was missing in the sexual education I received. I was taught about male and female bodies and how these fit together, about pregnancy and how to prevent it and about the causes and effects of STDs. As a girl I was taught to be sexy but not too sexy, as that could provoke rape or sexual harassment, and I learned through trial and error that loving too much or too many would result in being labelled a slut. My teenage experience with boys (not even having considered the possibility of dating people of other genders) consists of moments where kissing and being intimate 'just happened', in Tolman's (2005) words; I experienced these moments as if I had not actively chosen to be in them.

An important source for learning about coming of age, womanhood and sexuality, were the girl magazines I loved to read. What I learned there was that for many girls having sex, which was ultimately defined as a man penetrating a woman, for the first time could hurt. Learning this, I internalized pain as expectation for my own first time, which (maybe as a result) was indeed painful. And although teaching me the first time might hurt, the magazines did not say anything about all subsequent times. It took some years for the pain to decrease and as such it has greatly influenced my perception of sex.

My own experiences have caused an scholarly interest in sexuality. Moreover, they influence my perception and analysis of the stories in this study. As such it is relevant to account for this background and to reflect on my position as researcher by discussing my perception of different stages of the research process. Throughout this report I will do so for instance by elaborating on how I respond to (some of) the stories I collect and how I engage with the emotions they trigger.

¹⁰ See for instance Diamond (2008).

Research Storyline

In this chapter I have introduced the topic of my research and the main research question. Also I have constructed the theoretical background that is the basis of this study and I detailed my own research position. In chapter one I detail my methodology, starting by discussing how I gathered stories; I elaborate on how I invited women to participate, how I constructed the survey, and how I analysed the stories. Then, chapter two is the first chapter with results of my research. Here I focus on women who narrate difficulties in experiencing pleasure and I explore the norms they present in their stories, both overtly and covertly. Generally these women either do not question the norms influencing their experiences, or they do not have the discursive means to defy those norms. In chapter three I introduce women who do question and defy some (but not all) norms. Generally these women are more pleasure-focused than the women in chapter two, but still repressive norms are of great influence on their development of a healthy sexual subjectivity. Chapter four is the last chapter containing results of my study and focuses on women who can be considered pleasure narrators. Although they have encountered repressive norms, they have somehow managed to question, defy and overcome them, and as such choose to experience pleasure. Chapter four is followed by the conclusion, in which I summarise the answer to the main research question and I give suggestions for further research.

In this report you will meet 12 of the women who have participated in this research; you will get to know Noor, Jasmin, Madelyn, Saar, Simone, Heather, Daphne, Ruby, Hazel, Ivy, Alex and Chloe. You will hear who they are, what intimate and compelling stories they have to tell and how they understand their stories in relation to social norms. In discussing their stories I have attempted to share the women's stories in their words, in order to stay as close to their stories as possible. These women will tell stories about their childhood experiences with sexuality, about the first coitus, about masturbation, about closeness and intimacy, about desire and pleasure and about their body image. Before moving to their stories, the gathering of those stories will first be detailed.

1 - Methodology

Gathering Stories

In my study I explore how young Dutch women narrate their sexual desires and pleasures in a discursive reality that silences such experiences. By means of collecting and analysing women's stories I engage with the experiences women share, the norms informing those stories and women's strategies of engaging with those norms. The current chapter involves a discussion of this study's methodology by elaborating on the process of data collection and on the analysis of women's stories.

1.1 Inviting Women

For this research I gathered women's stories by means of an online survey. I posted a call for participants on Facebook, asking Dutch women to participate by answering open questions concerning sexuality, sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy. Originally my aim was to collect the stories of twenty women. This target was chosen because my intention was to collect stories of a diverse nature by the hands of women from different social backgrounds, without aiming for stories to be representative of specific subgroups. Analysing twenty surveys allows for diversity in stories and simultaneously allows for close attention to each woman and her stories.

Requirements included that the participants self-identify as 'Dutch' and 'woman'. As 'woman' is considered as cluster concept (Gatens 2006), it follows that this identification does not need to match one's 'official status'; a trans* woman who is officially registered as male can participate in this project. Similarly, a woman who does not have a Dutch nationality but who identifies as Dutch can participate; whether someone is Dutch is defined solely by her ability to respond to the survey in Dutch. The aim of using these directives was to not exclude particular women on the basis of social background in this initial stage.

Women were approached by publishing a call for participants on Facebook, a social networking site (boyd and Ellison 2007). Like other social networking sites Facebook allows people to "(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd and Ellison 2007, 211). Facebook was chosen as the medium on which to publish the call for participants because it provides the opportunity to reach many women at once.

Because Facebook is a social networking site the people I reached are limited to my own extended network; the call for participants reached my personal connections on Facebook and the connections these people made. I attempted to reach beyond my own network by also publishing the call for participants in Facebook groups I am involved in, which included people that are not necessarily my personal (extended) connections. Examples of these groups are the alumni association of my BA program in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, the group for women of my former ballet school, the group for the RMA program in Gender and Ethnicity and for Comparative Literature, and the groups 'Stiching Ondersteboven'¹¹ and 'De Meerminners'¹².

As a result of using Facebook as recruitment method, participants needed a Facebook account in order to come across my research and participate in it. Therefore, women who did not have access to the internet or who did not have a Facebook account were unable to participate. When exploring the list of respondents, it becomes apparent that many women are from similar backgrounds as I am¹³. Many respondents are, like me, white students in their twenties. There is a lot of diversity in terms of sexual orientation, which can perhaps be explained by the fact that I posted the call for participants in groups of my Gender studies network, the 'Meerminners' and 'Stiching Ondersteboven'. Also, the majority of respondents was

¹¹ 'Stiching Ondersteboven' can be translated as 'Foundation Upside Down', a foundation aiming at more societal visibility and acceptance for women with diverse sexualities and/or (gender-)identities (stichtingondersteboven.nl).

¹² "The name "meerminners" refers to the Dutch words "meer" (more) and "minnen" (to cherish) and to the Dutch word for mermaid, "meermin" (meerminners.nl). 'De Meerminners' is a support group for people interest/engaging in consensual non-monogamous relationships.

¹³ I will discuss in the section 1.2 'The Survey' that women (voluntarily) provided some information concerning their social background as an answer to the first survey questions. All participating women remained anonymous.

aged between 20 and 30. Because of these similarities between respondents, I cannot sufficiently address issues of racism, classism and ageism and how they intersect with sexuality. Therefore I have chosen to focus the analysis on young, mainly white, Dutch women's experiences.

Despite the similarities between respondents, the stories that were collected are diverse. Obviously two women from the same social background can have different sexual desires, pleasures and fantasies, just like two women from different backgrounds can tell similar stories¹⁴. The intention was to do explorative research and examine 'what is out there', to engage with the stories that women wish to share without wanting to generalize the results to specific subgroups, as the scope of this project is too small for such an endeavour. Achieving this goal is possible with the stories that were collected, despite the fact that respondents have relatively similar backgrounds.

In the call for participants women were asked to respond to questions regarding sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy in an online survey. In this call I stated that every Dutch woman was allowed to participate, regardless of age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class and (dis)abilities. I emphasised all information would be handled anonymously and confidentially. This post included a link to the online questionnaire, which was powered by thesistools.com, a website that provides the opportunity to produce free online questionnaires. The collected data was gathered in one excel file, in which all answers of one participant were featured horizontally and all answers to the same questions were featured vertically.

1.2 The Survey

When clicking the link to the survey, women were directed to an introduction letter in which the following questions regarding this study were answered: 'What is this research about?', 'Who can participate?', 'This is what you need to know' and 'Who am I?'

I explained that by asking women questions about sexuality they were invited to think about these topics and that my reason for doing so was my believe that sexuality is often discussed in a way that does not do justice to the diversity of women's experiences. In the media it appears problematic to tell intimate stories about sexual desire and pleasure, while sexualized imagery of women is commonplace. I explained that I wonder what stories women tell when they have the possibility to speak freely. I again highlighted respondents' anonymity and confidentiality by stating that only respondents themselves knew they participated in this study. I emphasized the importance of only answering questions they felt comfortable with. Sex and sexuality are intimate topics and in order to discourage women from submitting false or untrue

¹⁴ This also follows from Braidotti's (2011) layers of sexual difference, as discussed in the Introduction.

answers because of feeling uncomfortable, the ability to omit questions was highlighted.

The last question is one I want to elaborate on. When introducing myself I mentioned my name and that I study Gender Studies at Utrecht University. I argued that in Gender Studies the focus is on social (and not biological) differences between men and women, which relate to other social differences between people such as sexual orientation, class, age and ethnic background. This definition of Gender Studies is at least very incomplete and maybe even completely incorrect, as Gender Studies is about much more than the social differences between men and women. However, for the purpose of this study I chose this definition as it is one that has suited me best during the past years. In Dutch the word 'gender' is not commonly known. While being a Gender student I had many opportunities, at birthday parties, with family members, friends, and co-workers, to explain what I study. Defining gender as the social differences between men and women clarified the term 'gender' for people who had not encountered it before¹⁵. I did not want to scare women away from participating in this project and therefore I avoided the use of words or definitions (like gender but also ethnicity) that could have that result. Consequentially I chose this definition over more correct or complete ones.

In creating a survey¹⁶ I was inspired by the questions raised by Dubberley (2013) and Tolman (2005). As discussed above, Dubberley (2013) recently researched female sexual fantasy by asking women to share their stories in an online questionnaire. I explored the structure of Dubberley's surveys and related the questions to the themes and purposes of my research. The questions were then related to the questions Tolman (2005) raised during her one-on-one interviews with teenage girls, which pointed at the importance of including the body and physical feelings in the survey. Finally, I included questions regarding women's experiences of responding to the questions and asked how women felt about writing their stories down. The pilot version of the survey was sent to four women¹⁷ whom I asked to give feedback and if they felt comfortable enough to answer the questions. Their responses helped improve the survey and gave a sense of what I could expect.

After reading the introduction letter and clicking to the next page, respondents had to give consent to use their stories for this research and possibly for further publications. Only after giving consent women were able to proceed to the first question, in which they were asked to introduce themselves; "Describe yourself briefly. You can think of gender (sex), age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, physical restraints/possibilities, relation status, children, occupation,

¹⁵ It would be interesting to research why this definition has suited me best. In a sense, it shows it is hard for people to think outside the boxes of 'men' and 'women'. However, as this does not fit the scope of this research, I will not further elaborate on this point.

¹⁶ The survey can be found in full length in the appendix, in Dutch and English. Also the responses of one woman are included.

¹⁷ Three of those women were fellow Gender students, the fourth a natural sciences student.

education, hair colour, favourite food, or other things that are important to you”¹⁸. As such, the focus is on identity markers women could think of when describing themselves without forcing them to provide information they did not wish to share. Allowing women to choose how to introduce themselves without requiring specific information can provide a feeling of freedom for respondents as they can choose how to position themselves. Not requiring specific information is appreciated by respondents (Hite 1967) and ensures that women are not forced to identify according to a specific social category, which are subtle primers influencing their self-perception and responses (Sinclair, Harding and Lowery 2006). Similar to Dubberley (2013) I included identity markers such as hair colour and favourite food in order to make this question less formal and open to a variety of interpretations. Sofie¹⁹, one of the women who participated in the pilot, answered the question by discussing her age and relationship status and finished by stating *“and my favourite food is none of your business!”*²⁰ (Sofie, 1)²¹. This answer indicates that she felt safe enough to include a joke in her response.

After this introductory question sexuality in general was discussed. Women were asked about their first experiences with sexuality and were urged to not only think of their first kiss or the first time they had sex but also of moments that had a sexual hint to it, for instance when they were playing with dolls or watching certain television programs as children. Subsequently women were asked to discuss what had triggered these experience(s) and what happened within their bodies. In addition they were asked to describe how their experiences with sexuality changed over time.

Thus far, the questions regarded sexuality in general. In order to progress to sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy in particular, a short introduction was given so women were able to place these themes within the broader theme of sexuality:

“Sexuality is not just about sex, but instead consists of many different aspects. Examples of these are the erotic, pleasure, desire, fantasy, norms and values, intimacy, reproduction, roles and relationships. Experiences and feelings can be positive but also negative. From here, the focus will be on sexual desire, sexual pleasure and sexual fantasies”²² (Survey).

¹⁸ This question is based on Dubberley’s introductory question, albeit altered in a way that suits the Dutch language. One important difference between this question and Dubberley’s question is that ‘cis/trans’ is not included as identity marker, because these terms are uncommon in Dutch.

¹⁹ All names are pseudonyms. I will elaborate on the politics of naming and using pseudonyms in section 1.4 ‘Influencing Outcomes’.

²⁰ *“en mijn lievelingseten gaat je helemaal niets aan!”* (Sofie, 1).

²¹ All quotes by respondents are my translations. In each case the original Dutch quote can be found in the footnote referred to after the English quote.

²² *“Seksualiteit bestaat niet alleen uit seks, maar uit veel verschillende aspecten. Voorbeelden hiervan zijn erotiek, genot, verlangen, fantasieën, normen en waarden, intimiteit, reproductie, rollen en relaties.*

This way I positioned terms like sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy in relation to sexuality. I did not further define any terms, like sex, sexual desire, sexual pleasure and sexual fantasy, because I wanted to allow women to interpret and understand the terms in their own way.

Following this introduction, women were asked to relate sexual desires, pleasures and fantasies to sexuality in general. What role do these aspects play in their sexual life? How do these aspects play a role in their life in general? Women were then asked to describe one specific moment of sexual desire, pleasure or fantasy; for instance the pleasure they experienced the last time they had sex, their favourite fantasy, or a certain moment when they felt an enormous desire to be touched a certain way. The purpose of these questions was to engage deeper with one specific sexual moment. Subsequently the focus shifted to the body and women were asked to discuss the role their body played in their sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy.

The last couple of questions concerned the aspect of writing, asking women how they experienced answering the questions and writing down their stories, and whether this changed their perception of their sexuality. The survey concluded by asking whether they had something to add or share and by thanking them for participating. In case women wanted to receive the results of this study it was possible to leave their email-address. My email-address was included for additional questions or comments. There was no minimum or maximum amount of words that was to be used; the length of the answers was up to the respondent.

The survey question that was most important to my research was the question in which women described a specific moment of desire, pleasure or fantasy. Also, I considered it important to discuss the body²³ and the process of writing. The first set of questions about women's earlier sexual experiences and memories served two goals. First they were intended as a 'warming-up' to make women feel comfortable talking about sexuality by starting with general questions. Second the answers helped me to create an image of a particular woman and the development of her sexual self; it was a way of understanding women's backgrounds and the stories that followed.

In total the survey was online for nine days, from Friday until a Monday. After that I posted a Facebook message thanking all women who participated and shared their stories. The survey was viewed 156 times and 44 women filled in the entire questionnaire²⁴. What needs to be taken into account is that the women who chose to respond to the survey are likely women who do feel comfortable talking about sexuality. Women who feel uncomfortable doing so would not voluntarily have chosen to participate in this study (see Bowman 2014).

Ervaringen en gevoelens kunnen positief maar ook negatief zijn. In de rest van de vragenlijst ligt de nadruk op de seksueel verlangen, genot (in het Engels 'pleasure') en fantasieën."

²³ As Tolman discusses, the body is often forgotten in research on sexuality (Tolman 2005).

²⁴ When a survey is completely answered this means a woman worked through the entire survey. It does not mean that every question is responded to; omitting questions women felt uncomfortable with was allowed.

During the analysis it became apparent that analysing 20 respondents extensively was not possible due to limited space. If I wanted to explore each woman's stories closely, I had to reduce the amount of respondents. Choosing quality over quantity, I focused on 12 women's stories instead. Those 12 women were chosen from the pool of 44 respondents that filled in the entire survey. The amount of respondents was reduced from 44 to 12 by means of choosing a set of women telling stories about a variety of experiences. While some women focused on problems they encounter with respect to experiencing desire and pleasure, others focused on pleasure in their stories. The aim of analysing 20 women was to allow for diversity in stories and for close attention to each woman and her stories. My experience is that by analysing 12 women's stories these objectives are also achieved. The aim was not to analyse a representative group of respondents, but to create a sample capturing a variety of personal stories regarding sexual desire and pleasure, to listen to a diverse women's stories and create a wealthy collection of women's experiences²⁵.

1.3 Analysing Stories

At the start of this project the intention was to create a survey without deciding on the method of analysis beforehand. The survey was based on research by others, both academic and non-academic (see Tolman 2005, Dubberley 2013). The method of analysis was to follow from the data itself, which proved to be a very difficult process. The exploratory stage of analysis involved reading the stories while separating specific themes by using colour markers. The topics that were given a colour were not predefined but emerged while reading; they included 'body image', 'desire', 'intimacy' and 'taboo'.

I experienced this method of exploring data as too unstructured and started searching the literature for a clear-cut method, sketched out in worksheets, coding questions and diagrams. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was one of the methodologies that I considered following in order to analyse the data. 'Discourse' is a term to denote all forms of text (Schuman and De Lange 2012). It is about the entirety of concepts and terms people use to structure their reality and give meaning to it. Every group, every person does so in their own way, only some groups hold more power than others. Language holds power; it is never neutral. CDA encompasses methodologies in which these power structures and differences are analysed. CDA is a research strategy that is situated within the critical-emancipatory sciences. The aim is to uncover hidden power structures in texts, but also to provide emancipatory suggestions for alternatives. CDA can be defined as "critical research of social inequality and relations, that are

²⁵ See for instance Frost and Elichaooff (2014), who have similar aims.

characterized by dominance, discrimination, power and control, and that are manifested in the use of language” (Schuman and De Lange 2012). In this interdisciplinary methodology, social sciences and linguistics are combined by considering utterances as part of the social context.

In this study I explore young Dutch women’s narrations of their sexual desires and pleasures in a discursive reality that silences such experiences. I examine how women describe their experiences in language, how power in its repressive and productive form are of influence and what strategies women employ to develop their sexual self in such an environment. This research starts from the assumption that people’s social background influences their ability to develop their sexual subjectivity. As such, CDA as a methodology suits this study very well, because of its focus on ‘manifestations’ of ‘dominance, discrimination, power and control’ which can be found and explored in ‘the use of language’.

Another methodology I explored is the Listening Guide, which Tolman (2005) followed in her research on teenage girls’ sexuality. This method, anchored in relational theory, was developed by Brown and Gilligan, who were part of the Harvard Project on the Psychology of Women and the Development of Girls at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Milnes 2004). This method is based on the assumption that within the story of one woman, one can find different ‘voices’ which are at work simultaneously. In order to listen to these different voices, each text is read four times and each reading amplifies one particular voice (Brown et al 1989). This way statements and stories are considered from different perspectives, as depending on the lens a statement or story can have different meanings. The first time, a researcher focuses on a story’s plot by examining the who, what, where, when and why of a story. The second reading focuses on the self-story; how is a respondent herself located in the story? This self-story can be produced by underlining all sentences involving ‘I’ and creating an I-poem by placing all sentences featuring ‘I’ beneath each other. For example, this is part of Maria’s I-poem, one of the respondents in this research:

*“I can definitely desire sex and feel pleasure
When I am not in a relationship, I also do not desire sex
I do not fantasize, also not during sex
I notice that I feel more pleasure when my partner shows that he feels pleasure”²⁶*
(Maria, 6 and 8)

Following the plot- and self-reading, a story is read twice more in order to gain insight in specific ‘voices’. Originally, Brown et al (1989) listened for the care voice and the justice voice. Tolman

²⁶ *“Ik kan zeker verlangen naar seks en geniet ervan/Maar wanneer ik geen vaste relatie heb/verlang ik ook niet naar seks/Ik fantaseer niet, ook niet tijdens de seks/Ik merk dat ik meer geniet als mijn partner duidelijk laat merken dat hij geniet”* (Maria, 6 and 8).

(2005) listened for the erotic voice and the response voice. These voices are compared to the self-voice and/or each other. In seeing whether the voices are aligned, it is possible to see whether voices are contradicting each other or whether they form one coherent whole (Sorsoli and Tolman 2008). When using this methodology, each respondent is a research unit. The analysis happens per respondent, instead of for instance per theme. The voices of women are distinguished and can be compared to other women's voices.

An important difference between Tolman's research and mine is that she gathered teenage girls' stories by means of interviews while I used an online survey. Hence, she had the opportunity to follow respondents' threads, thereby deepening her understanding of a particular experience or topic, while I was bound to the initial survey questions. The method of gathering stories has consequences for the analysis. As the questions in the survey are limited and direct, so were the answers. Most responses were being formulated in first person, as a result of which creating an I-poem would almost be similar to copying the entirety of responses. The way language is used in answering an online survey differs from 'talking' with a researcher during face-to-face interviews. As a result the Listening Guide is only partly suited for this study.

The relational theory underlying the Listening Guide allowed me to construct a theoretical framework underlying this study. Following the Listening Guide, I understood each respondent as research unit²⁷. Nevertheless, I analysed the data by means of discourse analysis. Following Sheriff and Weatherall (2009) I understood discursive silences on women's sexual desire and pleasure as patriarchal institution, "which not only shapes women's experience but also directly fuels feelings of ambiguity and guilt when they make choices that do not fall into the category of what is "natural" for women" (Sheriff and Weatherall (2009) in Frost and Elichoff (2014, 48)). More practically, this patriarchal institution involving both repressive and productive moments of power results in the need to explore how women describe their experiences, how these are informed by social norms, how women manage to collide these experiences with what is considered normal and how they counter this discourse.

1.4 Influencing Outcomes

As Hesse-Biber (2014) argues, especially researchers conducting qualitative research are constantly involved with the data in a very intimate way. Therefore I made a first attempt at positioning my role as researcher in the introduction, in order to situate the knowledge acquired in this study and to allow for a feminist objectivity as proposed by Haraway (2003). In qualitative research in specific, in each step of the research process specific questions emerge,

²⁷ Instead of, for instance, choosing themes as research units.

most importantly concerning issues of power and control over the process of interpretation (Hesse-Biber 2014). In order to account for the choices I made in different phases of the process, I explore them throughout this report. In addition, in this paragraph I discuss some specific questions that emerged.

The focus of this research is on the stories women tell in written form by means of an online survey. Doing physical (one-on-one) interviews has advantages over written (online) surveys, such as the ability to focus on specific points and thereby deepen the understanding. As Tolman (2005, 37) states, “the narratives necessarily incorporate me and my questions about desire as well as what the girls had to tell”. Although the data I collected was less influenced by me and my appearance than it would have been in one-on-one interviews, as the researcher I did influence this study. As discussed by Hesse-Biber (2014), this is both the case in gathering and in analysing the stories.

In gaining the women’s trust by introducing myself and this project, I influenced what stories women were willing to share and what they thought I wanted to hear (Hoyle et al 2002). On top of that, the questions I did and did not ask in the survey, in combination with the formulation of the questions, influenced the stories (Hesse-Biber 2014). However, due to the research method, asking women online to fill in a questionnaire at a place and a time convenient for them, my influence in this research phase was minimised; women did not have to tell me about their desires face-to-face, but did so anonymously. They will have been more free to speak their minds, as all I could see was their words on paper (Hite 1967). I did not engage directly with the participants, as a result of which my physique, body language, and way of speaking did not influence the findings²⁸.

Although my role in the responses to the survey is relatively small, my role in the analysis and writing of this report is prominent (Hesse-Biber 2014). As the surveys were answered anonymously it is not possible to let respondents be part of the subsequent research phases. Consequentially, I am the one to define which themes are relevant and which are not, which stories are quoted and which are not, and what conclusions are drawn from the women’s words. I cannot ask women whether they agree with my analysis of their stories or with the way in which this analysis was written down.

A specific issue arising during the analysis was the politics of language. The survey was distributed in Dutch, aiming at women who can read and write in Dutch. Although the stories were written in Dutch and I read them in Dutch, this report is in English²⁹, the dominant

²⁸ This is true only to a certain extent; distributing the surveys through networks such as Facebook allows participants to examine my profile and see pictures of me on my own Facebook account.

²⁹ While analysing the women’s stories (in Dutch) I simultaneously started writing this report (in English). The language in which I analysed the stories and wrote the report therefore continuously shifted from Dutch to English and vice versa.

language in cross-European projects and publications (Van Nes et al 2010). In qualitative analysis the aspect of language is important; language is central to each phase of the project. Working with different languages has consequences, for instance when a concept is understood differently across languages. As Van Nes et al (2010, 313-314) state, “[q]ualitative research seeks to study meanings in subjective experiences. The relation between subjective experiences and language is a two-way process; language is used to express meaning, but the other way around language influences how meaning is constructed.”

This process of translation from Dutch to English is a process of interpretation and therefore leaves extra traces of me as researcher. In some cases literal translation causes loss of meaning while keeping the meaning intact causes an alteration in words, word order, sentences and style (Van Nes et al 2010). In such cases I have chosen to maintain as much meaning as possible with the least alterations in language.

In this research the focus is on the discursive production of women’s sexual stories. As was discussed above, discourse analysis focuses on the structures in language. Because language is never neutral and always holds power, both repressive and positive, considering the power structures underlying texts is an important way of uncovering hidden norms (Foucault 1998, Schuman and De Lange 2012). It is relevant to consider what stories are told and how they are told. The words and sentences that are used are important. Therefore, exploring what happens when a text ‘changes’ because it is translated is very important. In order to account for the translation process, each translated English quote can also be found in the original Dutch version in the footnotes.

Another issue involves the politics of naming. After women gave consent to their stories being used for this research, women were to introduce themselves in their own terms. Participants were not asked for their names and all but one did not mention it. All women whose words are quoted in this report were given pseudonyms. The politics of naming is an important issue of ethics and power, as discussed by Guenther (2009), who argues that it is commonplace in the social sciences to use pseudonyms instead of people’s real names. This custom is so widespread that names in research are often intrinsically assumed to be pseudonyms. How social science authors decide whether to name or not to name often remains undiscussed, even though decisions involved in this practice implicate dilemmas related to the ethical, political, methodological and personal. Although Guenther does not elaborate on these dilemmas in specific, her statement articulates my experiences with how to name. Some examples of the questions that came to mind are: What names should be chosen? Should ‘Dutch’ names represent ‘Dutch’ women? What are ‘Dutch women’ and what are ‘Dutch names’? Should a set of names be chosen from a diverse group of cultures? These questions represent merely one of the dilemmas arising when considering the politics of naming. It is a set of questions that can be

situated at the intersection of the dilemmas mentioned above, involving ethical, political, methodological and personal dimensions.

Guenther's (2009) insights are very relevant yet her point of reference differs from mine, as her research includes face-to-face contact where names of participants are known. In this research respondents remained anonymous. Choosing to name them is a matter of humanizing the participants and of making the report readable. Getting to know Daphne or Noor will have a different feeling than reading about participant 2.15 or 2.12. The problem that is caused by the process of naming is that as the researcher I am deciding what names these women are given. Choosing pseudonyms is an act of power performed by me. As Guenther (2009, 412) states, "Parents naming children, conquerors naming new lands, and organizations naming themselves all involve the assertion of authority and control". In order to create a readable report that is about the stories of real women, I have to accept the idea that I might give names that these women do not agree to³⁰.

In choosing names I decided to use female names excluding names of my personal friends or acquaintances that readers might recognize. Even when these names are pseudonyms this is a means to protect the people close to me. Also, the list of names encompasses a combination of Dutch and English names. They do not specifically encompass names from a variety of ethnicities, as most women defined themselves as white Dutch women. The names were randomly linked to the surveys.

A specific problem arising in this process concerned a respondent who was given the pseudonym Lillian. When engaging with their stories, 'Lillian' introduced herself as gender fluid or non-binary³¹. As a result I experienced the name Lillian as unsuitable and I opted for a more gender-neutral name. Hence this respondent was 'renamed' Alex.

1.5 Ethical Questions

The politics of language and of naming respondents are examples of ethical issues. During each stage of the research, different ethical issues arose. For instance, when considering who might be included in the research I examined the possibility of girls under 18 participating. Tolman (2005) discusses her recruitment process of teenage girls elaborately. She explains randomly selecting girls at two schools and sending them written invitations to participate in her research. Tolman elaborates on how the recruitment process highlighted the dangers associated with

³⁰ Retrospectively I regret not including a survey question in which women were to choose a pseudonym.

³¹ Often people are considered to be either man or woman. This respondent defies that assumption by stating that neither category fits them; they are neither man nor woman. By defining their gender as fluid or non-binary this respondent moves out of the pre-existing boxes without choosing another box.

sexual desire for girls, dangers of which both girls themselves and their parents were aware. “One urban girl’s father (...) not only refused to provide consent but berated [Tolman] for wanting to speak with his daughter about her sexuality and accused [her] of being immoral.” (Tolman 2005, 30). The girls themselves consciously knew that “[a]ny awareness or acknowledgement of their own sexual desire could be associated with being thought of as “bad”.”(idem, 30).

Apart from considering the (possibly detrimental) social consequences of participating, Tolman highlights that parental consent was required. Although the topic of the present study is similar to Tolman’s, the method is different. Working with online surveys makes it virtually impossible to require parental consent for girls under 18. Hence, Dutch women of every age could partake in the project without parental consent. Eventually no women participating in this research reported being younger than 18-years-old.

One of the ethical issues arising during the analysis is related to the online tool that was used for the survey. At the end of the survey, women had to submit their stories by clicking a button. However, the tool is built in such a way that whenever the link to the survey is clicked, even if only to look at the questions, I was notified by means of an empty row in the excel-file featuring all responses. Consequentially, I know the survey was looked at 156 times and I have the answers from women who started the survey without finishing it. These women did not click the ‘submit’ button but did give consent to use their words at the start of the survey.

It is possible that participants started the survey and then became aware of not feeling comfortable with the questions or their answers. Women might have clicked the survey away assuming their answers were not submitted. In order to handle these women’s stories carefully, I chose only to use fully answered surveys.

What I consider a very relevant and important question is what women had to *give* in order to participate, in relation to what they *received*. What were the costs and benefits of participating? First of all, of course women had to give their time. When coming across my call for participants on Facebook, they had to consider whether to spend time on this project before actually participating. Then, maybe even more important, they had to actively consider their experiences regarding sexual desire and pleasure. Some women might never have considered such questions elaborately before. Those women might have found this a difficult task; they might have experienced answering the survey as costing a lot of effort. For them participating might have had relatively high ‘costs’. Others might experience answering the questions as pleasurable and consider it a nice and interesting way of spending time, as thinking about sexuality and desire can be very pleasurable in itself. Some might even have felt a spark of desire.

Whether responding to the questions was difficult or easy, women spent time and effort by participating in this research. Therefore it was difficult to choose 12 respondents from the 44 women that completely answered the survey. As women had given me their time and stories it seemed unethical to exclude some women's stories but not others from analysis. On basis of what grounds should one be included and the other excluded when every woman's words are relevant and interesting?

As I started reading the stories, I wondered whether I was reading the stories of women that I knew personally. Fortunately, I have no way of knowing, as women are asked to describe themselves without having to provide their names or identities. In a few cases I had suspicions of who the respondent was, based on their descriptions and stories. When this 'suspicion' influenced my engagement with a particular respondent and her stories, I chose to exclude this respondent for analysis. I soon enough stopped wondering whether I personally knew the respondents, and I was able to focus on what was really important: thoroughly analysing women's sexual stories.

2 – Repressing Desires

2.1 Exploring Stories

In this research the focus is on young Dutch women's narrations of sexual desire and pleasure and how these are influenced by social norms. Each woman's narrations includes a multiplicity of stories (see Braidotti 2011, Sorsoli and Tolman 2008). These stories are discussed in the next three chapters. For each woman I explore which stories of sexual desire and pleasure she tells, which norms influence her stories and how she manages to negotiate her own experiences and stories with societal norms on women's sexual desire and pleasure.

Although there are many ways of categorizing the women I chose to follow the lines of desire and pleasure, as these are the main themes of this research. I did so following Thompson (1990), who categorized respondents in two groups. As mentioned in the introduction, the first consists of 'pleasure narrators'; these girls "imagine listeners – friends, parents, a community – who believe in pleasure" (Thompson 1990, 350). While their sexual subjectivity focuses on pleasure, girls in the second group 'deny sexual volition'; sex 'just happens' to them³². In this research I followed those lines of categorization, only I slightly altered the categories and added a third category. After exploring the women's stories the first time I divided respondents into three groups; the first group involves women who narrate obstacles in experiencing sexual

³² As also described by Tolman (2005).

desire and pleasure, the third group involves pleasure narrators and the second group involves women that, in my view, can be positioned in-between the previous categories.

The question is, what desires do women narrate? How are they narrated and related to prevailing societal discourses? Before discussing each woman's stories in particular it is relevant to explore how the survey is responded to and who the respondents are.

2.2 The Women

As previously mentioned, the survey was viewed 156 times in 9 days. 44 women completely filled in the survey and another 40 women answered some or most of the questions. Altogether almost 90 women took time to respond. Some did so by telling long and elaborate stories while others gave short and to-the-point answers. I was amazed by the amount of women that responded and by the stories they told. Several women mentioned they were happy to see women's sexuality being studied, as they felt it is an important topic to engage with. Some added comments: one woman argued we should be more open about women's sexual desire and pleasure, another that we should stimulate every woman to masturbate and experience orgasms. One woman urged me to found a support group to discuss these topics in real life. For me this proved that women's sexuality is important to discuss; I was amazed that so many women took time to share their stories and helped me in doing this research.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the survey was viewed more often than it was answered and it was not always completely answered. As the respondents are anonymous, it is impossible to ask them why they chose to answer certain questions and not others. Perhaps women only responded to the first questions as they realized answering the complete survey would take more time than expected. They might have considered answering those later or stopping at that point. Perhaps the questions were more personal than they expected and consequently they did not wish to proceed. Furthermore, technical reasons may have resulted in incomplete surveys. For instance, Noor starts her response by stating that *"[e]verything went wrong with the internet on this side so it could be that you received a survey with only two questions filled in. That one is mine"*³³ (Noor, 1). One could infer that Noor thought completing the survey was important enough to overcome technical difficulties, as she returned to the survey afterwards.

Not knowing the reasons behind women's pattern of answers has drawbacks. For instance, unanswered questions might point to important silences, social norms or taboos. This

³³ *"Er ging van alles mis met internet aan deze kant dus het kan zijn dat je een enquête hebt met maar twee ingevulde vragen. Die is van mij"* (Noor, 1).

is one of the costs of anonymity. However, by virtue of this anonymity women can feel more comfortable participating in this study and can feel more at ease in speaking freely compared to when their identity is known. This also becomes apparent in women's responses. Daphne for instance states: *"I am not ashamed of it, but it does help that I can share this anonymously"*³⁴ (Daphne, 1). Albeit their identities remain unknown, women did provide information about themselves. What can be determined about the 12 women whose stories were analysed?

In order to gain insight into the social backgrounds of the participating women, I categorized them by using the labels they attribute to themselves in the introductory question. Some women use few words, like Saar; *"I am a woman of 28 years old (almost 29), blond and white Dutchwoman, heterosexual, have a relationship of five years with a man. No children, university education (doctor)"*³⁵ (Saar, 1). Others are more elaborate. Chloe introduces herself by mentioning her age, education, relationship status and sexual preference, then elaborates on her thoughts on sexuality. *"I was sexually conscious already at an early age yet held my knowledge close to myself. (...) I am attractive both physically and internally. I had my first French kiss when I was nineteen and I had sex for the first time when I was twenty and I had my first orgasm when I was 7 (yes 7)"*³⁶ (Chloe, 1). Chloe proceeds to describe her openness about sex, after which she discusses her favourite food and religious beliefs. Much variation exists in women's introductions of themselves, but most answers included the identity markers presented in the question, such as age, sexuality and relationship status. Figure 1 on the next page features some basic social characteristics in combination with the respondents' pseudonyms.

In this sample of 12 women, all women are aged between 21 and 31. Their sexual orientation differs; most women considered themselves to be heterosexual, some categorized themselves as being lesbian, bisexual or pansexual³⁷. Most are in a monogamous relationship, while others are single, polyamorous³⁸ or in an open relationship. One woman originates from Hong Kong, while all others either describe themselves as either Dutch or white, or do not provide information regarding their ethnicity. Most respondents are university students or

³⁴ *"Ik schaam me er niet voor, maar het scheelt dat ik dit anoniem vertel"* (Daphne, 1).

³⁵ *"Ik ben een vrouw van 28 jaar (bijna 29), blond en blanke Nederlandse, heteroseksueel, heb een relatie van 5 jaar met een man. Geen kinderen, WO opleidingsniveau (arts)"* (Saar, 1).

³⁶ *"Ik was vrij jong seksueel bewust ook al hield ik deze kennis dwangmatig tot mijzelf. (...) Ik ben aantrekkelijk zowel fysiek als innerlijk, maar de laatste 7 jaar pas echt zelfverzekerd. Ik kreeg mijn eerste tongzoen toen ik 19 was en had voor het eerst seks toen ik 20 was en mijn eerste orgasme toen ik 7 was (ja 7)"* (Chloe, 1).

³⁷ Pansexuality can be understood as an alternative and non-binary sexual identity. It is a refusal to label sexuality, in opposition to the sexual binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Callis 2014).

³⁸ In the Oxford Dictionary *polyamory* is defined as "The practice of engaging in multiple sexual relationships with the consent of all the people involved." In my experience most polyamorous people will not agree with that definition, as polyamory is about more than just *sexual* relationships; love plays a crucial role. Open relationships and polyamory are both forms of consensual non-monogamy; both are interpreted in various ways.

graduates, but some received Intermediate Vocational Education³⁹.

The stories women tell differ greatly. Some are articulate about their thoughts while others struggle finding words. Some mention how culture influences their ideas, thoughts and feelings while others encounter problems which they attribute to themselves. Some know what they desire and what they consider pleasurable while others do not. Some see their body as an essential element of their sexual selves while others (consciously) disconnect pleasure from their body.

| Number | Pseudonym | Age | Sexuality | Relationship | Ethnicity |
|--------|-----------|-----|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1,1 | Sofie | 25 | Heterosexual | Partner | Dutch |
| 2,12 | Noor | 24 | Bisexual | Single | X |
| 2,15 | Jasmin | 25 | Pansexual | Polyamorous | White, Dutch |
| 2,24 | Maria | 21 | Heterosexual | Partner | Dutch |
| 2,36 | Madelyn | 23 | Heterosexual | Single | White |
| 2,57 | Saar | 28 | Heterosexual | Partner | White, Dutch |
| 2,88 | Simone | 21 | Lesbian | Partner | Dutch |
| 2,93 | Heather | 31 | Heterosexual | Single | X |
| 2,109 | Daphne | 27 | Heterosexual | Open relation | Hongkong |
| 2,112 | Ruby | 26 | Bi-curious | X | X |
| 2,114 | Hazel | 25 | Bisexual | Partner | Dutch |
| 2,123 | Ivy | 22 | Heterosexual | Partner | Dutch |
| 2,138 | Alex | 27 | Pansexual | Open relation | Dutch |
| 2,148 | Chloe | 24 | Heterosexual | Partner | X |

Figure 1. Basic social characteristics of women whose stories are analysed and/or quoted. 'x': theme is not mentioned, 'partner': partner is mentioned without describing type of relationship (for instance monogamous, polyamorous, open).

As discussed above, in this chapter the stories of women who narrate obstacles in experiencing sexual desire and pleasure are explored. We meet Ivy, Noor, Heather and Madelyn. Within their stories they discuss norms regarding sexuality, bodies and relationships. They elaborate on the development of their sexuality, a lack of desires, the inability to live up to their desires and fantasies, social fears and feelings of shame. Yet, every single one of them also discusses moments that hold potential, moments of desire and pleasure.

³⁹ 'Middelbaar Beroeps Onderwijs' (MBO) in Dutch.

2.3 Ivy

The first woman whose stories are analysed is Ivy, a 22-year-old blonde Dutch woman who calls herself “*pretty healthy*”⁴⁰ (Ivy, 1). She is heterosexual and lives together with her partner. Ivy is a woman who does not often experience sexual desire and who experiences difficulties in dealing with social norms. When asked what her first experiences with sexuality were, she states: “*Of course I saw things that had to do with it in the past, but that was of course weird and not interesting and dirty*”⁴¹ (Ivy, 3). Also today Ivy does not experience sexuality as normal: “*It is still not completely normal. I still experience some things as weird that others consider normal. I think doing some things is dirty and weird*”⁴² (Ivy, 5). Albeit time passed since her first experiences with sexuality as a child, sexuality is ‘not normal’ to Ivy, but ‘weird’ and ‘dirty’.

Although Ivy thinks topics related to sexuality are taboo and shameful, she does take time to respond to this survey. She describes experiencing her first kiss at 16. She wanted to experience a kiss as she thought this seemed nice and it was ‘supposed’ to happen; the stories she heard about sexuality, taught her she was supposed to kiss someone at that time. Kissing was part of growing up and becoming a woman. Ivy liked the kiss; she describes it made her entire body feel nice.

2.3.1 Desiring Intimacy

Ivy describes that although she desires to be intimate with her partner, this desire is not often sexual. She sometimes fantasizes about sex but almost never feels like actually having sex. Instead she desires intimacy:

*“I do think it is nice to touch each other, but often not more than that. I think it is important to enjoy it. (...) I feel pleasure when my boyfriend touches my vagina. Often, even this does not make me want to have sex, but it does feel nice. This often happens and it always feels nice. My boyfriend always knows what I enjoy”*⁴³ (Ivy, 6 & 8).

⁴⁰ “vrij gezond” (Ivy, 1).

⁴¹ “Natuurlijk heb ik wel dingen gezien vroeger die ermee te maken hadden, maar dat was natuurlijk raar en niet interessant en vies” (Ivy, 3).

⁴² “Nog steeds niet helemaal normaal, ik vind sommige dingen nog steeds raar die anderen heel normaal vinden. Ik vind sommige dingen vies of raar om te doen” (Ivy, 5).

⁴³ “Ik vind het wel fijn om aan elkaar te zitten, maar vaak meer niet dan dat. Ik vind het belangrijk om er van te genieten. (...) Ik geniet er altijd van als mijn vriend aan mijn vagina zit. Ik krijg hier meestal niet eens zin in seks van, maar het voelt wel fijn. Dit gebeurt wel vaak en het voelt altijd fijn. Mijn vriend weet ook wat ik fijn vind” (Ivy, 6 & 8).

To Ivy intimacy is more important than sex. She likes being intimate with her partner and 'touching each other' and she enjoys it when her vagina is touched without a need for sex. Her partner 'knows what she enjoys' and in their experiences her body is important:

*"I think that [the body] plays an important role. When I do things that are related to sexuality I use my body a lot. For instance with sex or when I kiss or cuddle with my boyfriend. When you use your body with those things, I think it increases the bond you have with someone"*⁴⁴ (Ivy, 9).

For Ivy the body is important to 'things that are related to sexuality', such as 'having sex', 'kissing' and 'cuddling'. Although Ivy mentions having sex in her answer, sex in general appears to be a taboo topic in her stories. Ivy emphasises words that have negative connotations; that which others find 'normal' is 'weird', 'dirty' and 'shameful' to her. The question this raises is why Ivy enjoys being intimate more than having sex; does Ivy experience little sexual desire because it is so weird, dirty and shameful to her?

2.3.2 Weird, Dirty and Shameful

It appears that what Ivy has been taught about sex (including sex being 'weird', 'dirty' and 'shameful') is related to a low level of sexual desire. Her perception of social norms regarding sexuality appears to problematise her experience of sexual pleasure and desire; her body appears to be locking these experiences out. Ivy states that some activities that are normal to others are dirty to her and that she rarely desires having sex. As such she appears to have internalized the double standard that teaches girls to be the objects of boys' sexual desire without developing a desire of their own, as proposed by Tolman (2005). In girls' socialization there is little or no room for the development of their own sexual subjectivity, as they are not supposed to have sexual feelings themselves:

"When it comes to girls, what we still expect, and in many ways continue to encourage, is their yearning for love, relationships, and romance. Acknowledgment of their sexual longings as an anticipated part of their adolescence is virtually nonexistent. We have effectively desexualized girl's sexuality, substituting the desire for relationships and emotional connection for sexual feelings in their bodies" (Tolman 2005, 5).

⁴⁴ *"Ik denk dat [het lichaam] een belangrijke rol speelt. Als ik dingen doe die met seksualiteit te maken hebben gebruik ik veel mijn lichaam. Bijvoorbeeld met seks en als ik zoen of knuffel met mijn vriend. Als je je lichaam gebruikt met die dingen vergroot dat wel de band met iemand denk ik"* (Ivy, 9).

This quote seems quite applicable to Ivy. As a child she was socialized thinking that sex is shameful and dirty. Growing up, she internalized these perceptions and developed a desire for intimacy but not for sex. She enjoys being touched and feels pleasure when her partner touches her vagina. This could be interpreted as a form of sexual desire, but Ivy understands this to be a desire for intimacy instead. In her perception no sexual desire is awakened in her.

Some other respondents also discussed difficulties in experiencing sexual desire, which they related to body image issues. Ivy does not refer to such issues; she enjoys the role her body plays in intimacy but just does not experience sexual desire. Her low level of sexual desire is connected to how her body feels instead of how it looks.

As stated above Ivy encountered 'things that had to do with sexuality' as a child; she experienced them as not interesting and dirty. When growing up Ivy learned more about sexuality; although she does not specify what she learned, it is probable that she came across sexuality in the media or heard others discuss it. Learning that 'of course' sexuality is 'weird and not interesting and dirty', Ivy's discursive reality became one involving a negative understanding of sexuality in which she internalized society's repressive norms. This understanding appears to continue to define Ivy's experiences with sexuality. Although her understanding of sexuality increased and she became sexually active with a partner, the feelings she was taught as a child continue to influence her perception of sexuality; perhaps they even have (at least partly) resulted in an inability to physically experience sexual desire.

Although appreciating intimacy over sex is not wrong in itself, it is problematic when caused by societal norms as it disallows the development of a sexual subjectivity. Ivy encountered social norms regarding sexuality and she internalized the most repressive ones, resulting in her sexual desire to be virtually non-existent. However, Ivy does not specifically discuss what she learned from the societal discourses on sex, other than it being weird, dirty and shameful. In order to gain more understanding of these discourses, Noor's stories are explored.

2.4 Noor

Noor is another woman experiencing little desire, but Noor experiences this as problematic while Ivy does not seem to do so. She is a bisexual woman in her mid-twenties. She is the woman that considered the survey important enough to start afresh after she encountered technical difficulties with the internet; despite these problems she wants to tell her stories. Like Ivy, Noor encounters obstacles in experiencing pleasure. This woman narrates knowing she has been able to fall in love with girls since age 16. At 18 she had sex for the first time with her boyfriend, who

broke up with her when at 21. After that Noor had an open relationship for some time, but when responding to the survey she is single.

2.4.1 The Importance of Context

Social norms play an important role in Noor's stories. She appears to be struggling with the development of her sexual subjectivity and potentially as a result she encounters difficulty in answering the survey-questions. She recently started reflecting on sexuality more, which caused many questions:

*"How have my culture and my upbringing influenced my sexual preferences? Am I maybe asexual? Or did I never experience good sex? With whom can I talk about this? Is an open relationship as depraved as my environment argues? Are poly-relationships as great as the poly-world make believe? What is so interesting about porn?"*⁴⁵ (Noor, 2).

Noor is very aware of the importance of context and she realizes that her surroundings influence her perceptions, experiences, norms and values. Noor knows she is not only influenced by her direct environment, including her family, friends and peers, but that she is also affected on a larger scale; she wonders how 'culture' influenced her sexual preferences and to what extent the beliefs of a subculture such as 'the poly-world' are true⁴⁶.

Throughout time Noor started to see sex as something that is "super special"⁴⁷ (Noor, 5), as a result of which she becomes scared when people come to close: "Imagine they want to have sex with me! Aaah"⁴⁸ (Noor, 5). The more the survey-questions are about sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy, the shorter Noor's answers are. She finds it difficult to describe how desire, pleasure and fantasy play a role in sexuality;

"I think this is a very difficult question. I don't know. I don't have sex dreams. Sometimes I kiss in a dream but that's it. Sometimes during sex I think, how long does this have to take? Am I doing this right? But no great fantasies. I think sex is nice. But for a long time I saw it

⁴⁵ "Hoe heeft mijn cultuur en mijn opvoeding invloed op mijn seksuele voorkeuren? Ben ik misschien asexueel? Of heb ik nog nooit echt goede seks meegemaakt? Met wie kan ik daarover praten? Is een open relatie zo verdorven als mijn omgeving roept? Zijn polyrelaties zo geweldig als de polywereld doet geloven? Wat is er nu zo interessant aan porno?" (Noor, 2).

⁴⁶ Noor is the only respondent posing such specific questions concerning the importance of context. Others do elaborate on the role of context and social norms and values regarding bodies and desires, albeit less specifically. This will be elaborated upon later.

⁴⁷ "superbijzonder" (Noor, 5).

⁴⁸ "Stel dat ze seks met me willen! Aaah" (Noor, 5).

mainly as an expression of love. This is something he⁴⁹ doesn't do with everybody. I am special⁵⁰ (Noor, 6).

Instead of elaborating on her experiences, Noor is mostly discussing what she does not know or have. No 'sex dreams', no 'great fantasies'. Although 'sex is nice' she seems to be having it as she feels obliged in a relationship. It is an act of love about which she does not feel confident ('am I doing this right') and which she rather wants to be over ('how long does this have to take'). When asked to describe what role sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy play in her daily life, she merely states "None" (Noor, 7), and the survey question that is to be answered by narrating a specific moment of desire, pleasure or fantasy is not answered at all. In discussing how she experienced responding to the survey, Noor shares some of her thoughts; *"I do not think I can be of any service to you. I really wonder whether I miss that much. Is there something wrong with me? Am I maybe asexual after all?"⁵¹* (Noor, 10).

2.4.2 Rape Myth

Although wondering whether she is asexual, Noor describes one experience that is clearly about desire and pleasure. She narrates a story about a game she played as a child:

"Okay, I never told this to anyone. When I was about ten years old I played little rapist⁵² with the girls next door. A strange man would come through the window and would lie on top of you as you sleep. We took turns to be the rapist. And we took turns to be the victim. The victim was the most wanted role. Personally I thought I was a very good victim. During this game I often had to go to the toilet. My underwear would be a bit wet and therefore I thought I had to pee"⁵³ (Noor, 3)

⁴⁹ Noor mentions a 'he', someone that 'doesn't do [this] with everybody', without specifying who this person is. It might be an ex-partner, or 'men in general'. Using 'he' as 'men in general' is an interesting choice, as she introduced herself as being bisexual, which could be assumed to mean that a sex partner could also identify as woman or different gender.

⁵⁰ *"Ik vind dit een heel moeilijke vraag. Ik weet het niet. Ik heb nooit seksdromen. Ik zoen wel eens in een droom maar meer dan dat niet. Ik denk weleens tijdens de seks: hoe lang moet dit nog duren? Of doe ik het wel goed? Maar geen grootse fantasieën. Ik vind seks fijn. Maar ik heb het lange tijd vooral gezien als blijk van liefde. Dit doet 'ie niet met iedereen. Ik ben bijzonder"* (Noor, 6).

⁵¹ *"Ik heb niet het idee dat ik je van enig nut kan zijn. Ik vraag me ook af of ik echt zoveel mis. Is er iets mis met mij? Ben ik misschien toch asexueel?"* (Noor, 10).

⁵² "Verkrachttertje" in Dutch, which is the diminutive form of 'rapist'.

⁵³ *"Okay, dit heb ik nog nooit aan iemand verteld. Toen ik een jaar of tien was speelde ik met mijn buurmeisjes verkrachttertje. Dat er een vreemde man 's nachts door het raam naar binnen komt en dan bovenop je gaat liggen terwijl je slaapt. Om de beurt waren we de verkrachter. En om de beurt waren we het slachtoffer. Het slachtoffer was de meest gewilde rol. Ik vond zelf dat ik een heel goed slachtoffer was. Tijdens dit spelletje*

As Friday (1973) and Dubberley (2013) elaborate on, many women have rape fantasies without actually wanting to be raped. Perhaps Noor and her friends were longing for intimacy and pleasure. The fact that Noor ‘never told this to anyone’ implies that she was aware this game had problematic aspects to it; she knows playing a rape-game is taboo.

Interestingly, being the victim was the most popular role. The victim does not have a say in what happens but undergoes whatever the rapist wants to happen. Not being in charge, she is not to blame for what happens. If the consequence is having wet underwear this was not her own fault as she was the victim. When asked to describe the cause of the experience Noor answers the following:

*“I didn’t know it at the time but later I realised that I was wet because it was arousing. I also liked it more to play it with one girl next door than the other. A couple of years later I realized I was in love with her”*⁵⁴ (Noor, 4).

Noor was aroused by the game and later realized it was in some way related to being in love. In the story Foucault’s repressive and positive power relate to each other in complicated ways. As discussed in the introductory chapter, discourse always holds both repressive and positive power; even a taboo that represses (women’s) sexuality in some way also holds potential and can be productive (Foucault 1998). In this case the girls are acting out the rape-myth, an important narrative today which represses and contains women’s and girls’ sexuality, in such a way that it allows them to experience pleasure.

Both victimhood and sexual assault are gendered; while rapists are generally men, victims are generally women (Hayes, Lorenz and Bell 2013). Rape is a gendered crime that exists in a discourse where victim-blaming is accepted and common; within this discourse the rape myth focuses on how women’s behaviours can result in rape. Girls are continually warned of sexual violence and learn to behave in a way that minimizes the odds of experiencing sexual violations. The rape-narrative guiding such rules can be seen as an example of repressive power (potestas), as the focus is on that which girls cannot do, such as wearing short skirts or going out alone after dark. By means of the rape myth girls’ daily behaviour is influenced and controlled.

At age 10 Noor and her friends already knew rape was something involving a victim and a perpetrator. Although the repressive norms involved in this story are obvious, this story also points at the possibly productive aspects of the rape myth. Playing out this narrative allows

moest ik vaak naar de wc. Mijn onderbroek werd een beetje nat en daarom dacht ik dat ik moest plassen” (Noor, 3).

⁵⁴ *“Ik wist dat op dat moment niet maar later besepte ik me dat ik nat werd doordat het opwindend was. Ik deed het spelletje ook liever met mijn ene buurmeisje dan met de andere. En een paar jaar later besepte ik me dat ik verliefd op haar was”* (Noor, 4).

them to experience pleasurable feelings like intimacy, closeness and arousal (expressed by having 'wet underwear'). The girls change this narrative with mostly negative connotations in their favour and are able to find pleasure. Repressive power is bent to allow for something positive.

Noor's narrations involve multiple (repressive) norms. Apart from the rape-game she mentions a taboo on open relationships and implies a taboo on bisexuality. She introduces herself as bisexual and states "*I never really had problems with this (when you do not count falling in love with a hetero-girl). In my environment no one really thought this was weird*"⁵⁵ (Noor, 1). By stating that 'no one really thought this was weird' she is implying that others *could* consider this weird, but did not.

Noor also mentions her social environment when discussing her previous open relationship. Noor had difficulties communicating her open relationship to the outside world⁵⁶. Not knowing how to understand this type of relationships, she asks herself on the one hand whether open relationships are as depraved as her environment argues and on the other hand whether poly-relationships are as great as the poly-world argues. She has difficulties living in the space in-between the people who choose their relationships to be open or polyamorous and the people who find such relationships problematic. Having agreed to an open relationship but finding it difficult to communicate this to others points at a feeling of taboo regarding her relationship choices.

Noor discusses a very clear moment of desire in her stories when elaborating on the game she used to play as a child, but her emphasis is on the difficulties she encounters with regard to sex and sexuality. These difficulties include being open about her relationship choices, wondering whether she is asexual and being scared that people have expectations she cannot live up to. Instead of having been able to develop a sexual subjectivity that allows her to experience desire and pleasure, Noor's discursive reality has mostly allowed her to develop social fears concerning her sexual self.

⁵⁵ "*Hier heb ik nooit echt problemen mee gehad (Als je verliefd worden op het heteromeisjes niet meetelt). In mijn omgeving vond niemand dit echt raar*" (Noor, 1).

⁵⁶ In her responses she does not describe what this relationship looked like. There are many ways of shaping an open relationship; for instance she and her partner might have allowed each other to have sexual experiences with others or perhaps she and her partner had multiple love-partners simultaneously.

2.5 Heather

Such social fears are also experienced by Heather. Heather is a single and straight 31-year-old woman with a university education, who describes herself as “(naturally) jobless, depressed and (maybe useful for this research) still virgin”⁵⁷ (Heather, 1). Compared to other respondents Heather’s answers to the questions are very short and to the point. Because Heather is a virgin, her sexual life focuses on solo sex and fantasies. Her first experiences with sexuality were reading her grandmother’s romance novels, which resulted in “a physical reaction in my abdomen, warm and tight feeling”⁵⁸ (Heather, 4). Throughout time she kept reading about sex and today she states to be “very happy with [her] vibrator”⁵⁹ (Heather, 5).

2.5.1 Good Stories

As Heather never experienced partner sex, her sexuality is closely related to fantasy; “without fantasy, it’s not much fun on my own”⁶⁰ (Heather, 6). She thinks about sex when reading sexual scenes in books and describes how fantasies are the core of her pleasure. It is hard for her to experience orgasms when masturbating without fantasizing:

*“My orgasms are stronger when they are accompanied by a good story. The best experience was the first time with a vibrator and a fantasy about two men who were very sweet at first and started to touch me more and more”*⁶¹ (Heather, 8).

Heather experiences pleasure when fantasising and using her vibrator; this combination can bring her to orgasm. She discusses orgasms multiple times, indicating their importance to her. Nevertheless she also makes contradictory statements; “The reading and fantasizing is more sexual and sensual than the chasing of an orgasm”⁶² (Heather, 9). Although at first it seems as if ‘reading’ and ‘fantasizing’ are means to achieve an end (orgasm), these means can also be considered ends in themselves; experiencing them is ‘more sexual and sensual’ than experiencing orgasms. Altogether Heather is a woman who experiences pleasure during solo sex: she knows what she enjoys, which fantasies are pleasurable to her, how she has to be

⁵⁷ “(uiteraard) werkloos, depressief en (misschien nuttig voor dit onderzoek) nog maagd” (Heather, 1).

⁵⁸ “een fysieke reactie in mijn onderbuik, warm en strak gevoel” (Heather, 4).

⁵⁹ “heel blij met mijn vibrator” (Heather, 5).

⁶⁰ “Zonder fantasie is de lol eraf in m’n eentje” (Heather, 6).

⁶¹ “Mijn orgasmes zijn sterker met een goed verhaal erbij. De beste ervaring was de eerste keer met een vibrator en een fantasie over twee mannen die eerst heel lief waren en steeds handtastelijker werden” (Heather, 8).

⁶² “Het lezen en fantaseren is veel seksueler en sensueler dan het najagen van een orgasme” (Heather, 9).

touched in order to reach an orgasm and she enjoys the sensuality these actions are accompanied by.

2.5.2 Social Fears

However, when Heather is in public she encounters difficulties. With others, Heather's "*social fears and lack of experience mostly suppress the sexual feelings*"⁶³ (Heather, 7). Although she might long to experience sex with a partner, she is unable to fulfil this wish as a result of 'social fears' which 'suppress sexual feelings'. When Heather is alone she is able to acknowledge her sexual self, yet she is unable to do so in company of others.

Perhaps this social insecurity is related to her body perception. When asked to describe to what extent her body plays a role in her experiences with sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy, she states "*Moderate. I rather fantasize about another body, since I am no fan of mine*"⁶⁴ (Heather, 9). This statement is followed by the sentence quoted above, in which she mentions enjoying the sexuality and sensuality of reading and fantasising more than chasing an orgasm. Fantasising is a core activity in Heather's sex life but these fantasies are about 'another body' because she is 'no fan' of her own body. It appears that Heather can only acknowledge her sexual self in private, when fantasising of a body that is not her own. Linking this back to her social fears in public has striking consequences; if Heather can only acknowledge her sexual self when she fantasises it to be different, it is no wonder that in public places, where she is limited to her own 'actual' body, her sexual feelings are repressed.

Perhaps it can be inferred that in Heather's experience it is taboo to be a sexual person in public. This experience is further complicated by another statement. Like some other respondents Heather mentions the importance of the location where she responded to the survey. She answered the questions in a bar and feels affected by her surroundings. For instance, she finishes her fantasy about two men touching her by stating "*(Very weird to fill this in in a cafe :P)*"⁶⁵ (Heather, 8, brackets original). She also mentions the location when asked how she feels about responding to the survey: "*It remains something uncomfortable and inappropriate because of social conventions. It quickly feels cheap*"⁶⁶ (Heather, 10). Because of being in a public space she feels 'uncomfortable', 'inappropriate' and 'cheap'.

An implication of answering the questions in a bar is that others might see what Heather is writing. She perceives it as taboo to write about sex, because according to social norms it is

⁶³ "*Sociale angsten en gebrek aan ervaring verdringen de seksuele gevoelens veelal*" (Heather, 7).

⁶⁴ "*Matig. Ik fantaseer liever over een ander lichaam, aangezien ik geen fan ben van het mijne*" (Heather, 9).

⁶⁵ "*(Heel raar om dit in te vullen in een cafe :P)*" (Heather, 9, emphasis original).

⁶⁶ "*Het blijft iets ongemakkelijks en ongepasts hebben door sociale conventies. Het voelt snel goedkoop*" (Heather, 10).

uncomfortable, inappropriate and cheap to discuss sex. Perhaps her feeling of security and anonymity is reduced as a result; this might even have resulted in Heather giving short answers. This too can be linked back to her not being able to acknowledge herself as sexual being in public. When others see her writing about sex she acknowledges herself as sexual being, which she experiences as problematic.

Heather is 'no fan' of her own body. She experiences discussing sex in public, or even privately writing about it in public, as inappropriate and cheap. Following these experiences it can be inferred that Heather internalized repressive norms regarding female sexuality. As a result she is unable to experience herself as sexual being publicly. Being able to understand oneself as sexual being and having an identity as sexual being are important aspects of one's sexual subjectivity, following Tolman's (2005) definition as discussed in the introductory chapter. As such, it can be argued that Heather's development of her sexual subjectivity was hindered by the social norms repressing her sexuality. These norms are not questioned or problematized by Heather, instead they are taken for granted; it appears that Heather does not have the means to question them.

2.6 Madelyn

Like Heather, Madelyn describes having a negative body image that influences her sexual experiences with others. Madelyn describes herself as a 23-year-old white woman, who is "*a bit more heavy than most but still fall[s] into the category 'normal' (...)*"⁶⁷ (Madelyn, 1). After that she mentions being a student coming from a family that can be positioned as higher middle class. She is single and "*would say*"⁶⁸ she is heterosexual.

This introduction is telling, as it is apparent that Madelyn reflected on her social identity. Her weight is very important; she considers herself too heavy to be normal, but not heavy enough to be classified as such. She analysed the social economic position of her family and classified them as higher middle class. Also, Madelyn 'would say' she is heterosexual, thereby implying she reflected on her sexual orientation; she appears to have considered other options. Perhaps she also feels attracted to women but considers this attraction not significant enough to describe herself as anything other than heterosexual. Perhaps when examining other options she lacked a suitable term to describe her feelings and desires, wherefore she chose the category that fits best; she 'would say' she is heterosexual.

⁶⁷ "*iets dikker dan gemiddeld maar val nog binnen wat 'normaal' gevonden wordt*" (Madelyn, 1).

⁶⁸ "*zou zeggen*" (Madelyn, 1).

2.6.1 Discovering Pleasure

Several women in this study narrated experiences with touching their vulva as children. For instance, Simone enjoyed placing her hand on her mons pubis⁶⁹, because it felt nice and warm in the shape of her hand. Chloe loved sitting on the corner of the sofa with one leg on each side. Madelyn enjoyed holding a pillow or part of her blanket between her legs. Doing so felt pleasant in a passive way; *“not like enormously clear ‘OH THIS IS FUN’, but more like ‘oh nice’”*⁷⁰ (Madelyn, 4).

When Madelyn was about 14-years-old she became interested in sexuality. She ‘discovered’ her libido after she had penetrative sex at 19 and ever since she is more actively engaging with her sexuality. Being single, she describes having solo sex when she is turned on by stimuli from her environment, such as a beautiful video clip, a romantic movie, certain types of music or porn. Fantasising is difficult for Madelyn because she is easily distracted; therefore she watches porn. There is a specific scene she considers pleasurable watching:

*“When I watch porn I enjoy watching scenes in which the woman is lying on her back in bed while the man sits on his knees next to the bed. I enjoy this position myself and watching it helps me to imagine that I am feeling what happens on screen. When I focus I can almost feel the penetration, without touching myself”*⁷¹ (Madelyn, 8).

Madelyn articulates situations that turn her on and describes what sexual positions she considers pleasurable. Penetrative sex is pleasurable to her; the first time she experienced penetration she ‘discovered’ her libido and today she describes penetrative sex when asked to narrate a specifically pleasurable moment. Perhaps she enjoys the position she describes because the angle of penetration is pleasurable to her. Perhaps something in the relative position of her and her partners’ body is pleasurable. Bodies are very important in Madelyn’s stories; her body image greatly influences her sexual experiences.

2.6.2 Body Image

For Madelyn sexuality is closely related to her self-image, which is significantly influenced by her body image. Apart from introducing herself as heavier than most women, her description of how

⁶⁹ ‘Venusheutel’ in Dutch.

⁷⁰ *“niet een onwijs duidelijk ‘OJEE DIT IS LEUK’, meer een ‘goh fijn’”* (Madelyn, 4).

⁷¹ *“Wanneer ik porno kijk, kijk ik graag naar scènes waarin de vrouw op haar rug op bed ligt en de man op zijn knieën voor het bed zit. Dit standje vind ik zelf fijn en er naar kijken helpt me om me voor te stellen dat ik voel wat er op het beeld gebeurt. Als ik me concentreer kan ik dan, zonder mezelf aan te raken, toch bijna die penetratie voelen”* (Madelyn, 8).

her sexuality developed throughout time focuses entirely on her appearance and self-image, instead of for instance on changes in her sex life, desires and fantasies:

“My sexuality has always been connected to my (negative) self-image and how this was in the way. Solo, I learned to put this aside and it no longer causes problems, but with a partner I would like to develop myself (release self-image). I have been working on that for a couple of years”⁷² (Madelyn, 5).

Madelyn’s body image results in a negative self-image, which hinders her sexual development. Although she was able to overcome this in solo sex she still encounters problems when having partner sex. During sex, her focus on her body prevents her from focusing on pleasure:

“I consider my body mainly as obstacle. I have perfectly internalized the messages about beauty ideals that our society endows, but luckily I am aware of this. As a result I consider partner sex a bit frightening. At the same time I know that with a steady partner I could come over this. Only I haven’t had a steady partner for some time”⁷³ (Madelyn, 9).

Madelyn states that she ‘internalized the beauty ideals endowed by society’. Her body does not fit those ideals and therefore causes problems; her negative body image results in seeing her body mainly as ‘obstacle’ to experiencing pleasure. She is scared of having partner sex and when she does have partner sex she is unable to let go of her body image.

Within her stories, Madelyn does not specifically elaborate on what these beauty ideals entail. What beauty ideals are women taught in society? What role does the body play in society? The societal pressures that Madelyn explains are elaborately discussed by American feminist Naomi Wolf (1991) in *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, an international bestseller on how beauty is a contemporary form of exploitation of women. In her work Wolf discusses the relationship between women’s liberation and women’s beauty. Her argument is that the Feminine Mystique as put forward by second-wave feminist Betty Friedan (2010[1963])⁷⁴ has been replaced by the Beauty Myth. Wolf argues that “[t]he more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us” (Wolf 1991, 10). In order to keep the

⁷² *“Mijn seksualiteit is altijd verbonden geweest met mijn (negatieve) zelfbeeld, en hoe dit in de weg stond. Op solo vlak heb ik geleerd dit opzij te zetten en levert het geen problemen meer op, maar op duo vlak zou ik me nog graag willen ontwikkelen (zelfbeeld loslaten). Daar werk ik al een paar jaar aan” (Madelyn, 5).*

⁷³ *“Mijn lichaam zie ik grotendeels als belemmering. Ik heb de boodschappen over schoonheidsidealen die onze maatschappij ons meegeeft perfect geïnternaliseerd, maar ben me hier gelukkig wel bewust van. Dit maakt dat ik partner sex een beetje beangstigend vindt. Tegelijkertijd weet ik wel dat ik me hier bij een vaste partner overheen zou kunnen zetten. Ik heb alleen al een tijd geen vaste partner meer gehad” (Madelyn, 8).*

⁷⁴ In this work Friedan (2010[1963]) explores the ‘problem that has no name’, encompassing the frustrations of middle class housewives of the 1960s who were bound to stay home and nurture their children. The book was a catalyst for second wave feminism in the United States.

power balance intact, women must be dominated sexually and physically. With an increase in women's financial and material strength, restraints have shifted from the material to the psychological realm.

In order to keep women at a distance from men and their accomplishments, women are burdened with a myth telling that 'beauty' exists universally and objectively; "women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it" (Wolf 1991, 12). An imagery of what women are supposed to look like is imposed by mass media; through its all-encompassing presence in contemporary society this imagery cannot be avoided. Instead of being about "intimacy and sex and life" (13), thereby celebrating women, it is about "emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power" (13).

According to Wolf (1991) beauty is the new religion when it comes to repressing women's sexuality. People have to learn how to be sexual; they have to be socialized. Today's sexual education no longer comes from other human beings, but from the media and the *beauty pornography* it portrays. In advertisements, movies, magazines, films (and today, it might be added, internet), women are taught how to look and how to behave. The beauty myth advocates an idea of beauty that is intrinsically linked to sexuality, desire and pleasure. Simultaneously, in their socialization women are taught that it is more important to be desirable than desiring. In effect, today's women know, consciously or not, they must be beautiful in order to be desirable, which is substituting their own desire.

Like Wolf (1991), Tolman (2005) makes a similar argument when stating that "[s]ociety's dominant cultural construction of femininity encourages girls and women to be desirable but not desiring" (Tolman 2005, 115). The beauty myth tells women what their bodies are supposed to look and in doing so erase women's desire. Instead of focusing on how the body feels during sexual experiences, the focus is on its looks.

According to Wiederman and Sarin (2014), researchers focusing on the psychology and psychophysiology of sexuality and sexual desire, the body of research on body image has increased since 1990, albeit it still limited. In their examination of the literature on body image, they argue that the question to ask is how much a person's body image concerns the mind of a person during sex. The popular definition of body image includes a person's "self-assessment of overall appearance, or the extent to which a person is satisfied with how his or her body looks" (Wiederman and Sarin 2014, 360). The time a person spends on this self-assessment and satisfaction has multiple consequences, including less desire, increased aversion to sex, decreased arousal, increased anxiety, less frequent orgasm and increased risky behaviour. This is also the case in Madelyn's stories; the time and energy she spends on contemplating about the way her body looks is not spent on experiencing pleasure and enjoying sex. But what are

potential causes of a negative body image according to Wiederman and Sarin? Apart from actual physical appearance and life circumstances, they mention causes that can be aligned with Wolf's argument. Exposure to unrealistic standards is an important cause, like gender roles and comments or criticism regarding the body.

Women encounter unrealistic beauty standards on a daily basis. It can be argued that as a result there is a taboo on real bodies and on women's desiring bodies. One example regards body weight; a woman has to be thin to be beautiful. Madelyn considers herself heavier than most, therefore she cannot be beautiful. As she is not beautiful, she cannot desire. When having sex her mind is occupied with her lack of satisfaction with her body, instead of experiencing desire and pleasure. Madelyn knows pleasure; she knows what sparks her desire, what she enjoys seeing and what positions she enjoys in partner sex. However, due to her inability to conjoin her perception of her body with the beauty ideal endowed in society, Madelyn is unable to focus on this pleasure. She does mention being aware of this; she questions the beauty ideals she internalized and attempts to focus on the way her body feels instead, but thus far can only achieve this during solo sex.

Madelyn internalized repressive norms regarding her body and pleasure, but also experiences a taboo on sex in general. She considers it uncomfortable to respond to the survey and is not used discussing "such intimate topics" with friends. She participated in this research because she considers it important that such research is carried out and although she tries hard to answer the questions, she feels like she cannot help that responses are somewhat distant. Writing down her stories makes her feel vulnerable: *"It makes me aware of my own sexuality, or that my sex life does not read like a nice, exciting story but more like the story of an insecure teenager. But hé. I am being myself"*⁷⁵ (Madelyn, 11). Madelyn is almost apologetic for her stories and the lack of excitement in them.

2.7 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I engaged with the stories of Ivy, Noor, Heather and Madelyn, who all encounter difficulties in developing their sexual subjectivity in some way. Engaging with the stories of those four women triggered emotions within me that I feel the need to account for. Although each woman's stories hold potential in some way, in my experience they are predominantly characterized by a repression of sexual desire and pleasure. Noor even states feeling like her

⁷⁵ *"Het maakt me er bewust van dat mijn seksualiteit, of eigenlijk mijn seksleven, niet leest als een leuk, spannend verhaal maar meer als een onzekere tiener. Maar goed. Ik ben ik"* (Madelyn, 11).

stories are not useful in this research. *"The not writing down"*⁷⁶ (Noor, 11) of answers in combination with the questions she poses appear to trouble her deeply. Noor's stories in particular troubled me as a researcher⁷⁷. Her stories made me feel uncomfortable about my research and its methodology. The way in which the survey-questions troubled her seemed problematic and made me angry as my study asked her questions that caused distress and I was unable to follow up on her answers and questions because her identity is unknown to me. I experienced feelings of powerlessness and frustration, in this story and others, because of my inability to respond to those women and their feelings.

My response to reading the stories was in line with how Tolman (2005) described responding to girls' stories on sexuality. Tolman mentions that she was aware that asking girls about their sexual desire was new to them and would imply that they would have to break a silence. She states that she "had to be prepared to respond to whatever feelings the interview raised for them – distress, joy, curiosity, fear. (...) I wish I had been more prepared for how their words and silences would affect me" (Tolman 2005, 35). As I read this statement for the first time it scared me. I was afraid of responses my research might trigger, the stories I would hear and the consequences this would have for me. Also, I had no clue as to what this statement meant. Could Tolman have prepared better? Could I prepare myself better than she had, knowing that she felt this way? I had no idea how to prepare other than reading women's stories on sexuality that were collected in other studies⁷⁸. While engaging with the stories I collected myself, I could not help but feel unprepared, powerless and distressed. I recognised Tolman's statement and decided that I could do no more than take a step back, do my research and thereby add to the scholarship on women's sexuality.

In that spirit it is relevant to engage with a comment Heather made. When introducing herself she specifically mentions being a virgin, because this 'might be useful for this research'. This response is thought-provoking, as it is a clear indication of Heather adapting her stories to her expectations of what I want to hear. As such, Heather's statement proves that women's perception of me and my study influences what they are willing to share and what they think I want them to tell me⁷⁹. Accounting for this is relevant as it increases the feminist objectivity of this research.

All four women in this chapter are encountering problems in experiencing sexual desire and pleasure to their full extent. For different reasons their sexual lives are characterized by experiencing obstructions. Multiple repressive norms negatively influence their ability to

⁷⁶ *"Het niet opschrijven"* (Noor, 11).

⁷⁷ I discuss my experience of emotions this respondent triggered in me as this can be considered an important aspect of the reflexive tradition of research (Widdowfield 2000).

⁷⁸ Of which Tolman (2005), Friday (2013[1973]) and Dubberley (2013) are examples.

⁷⁹ As also put forward by Hoyle et al (2002) and Hesse-Biber (2014).

develop their sexual subjectivity in a way that allows them to experience themselves as sexual beings with a sexual identity. The women whose stories are analysed in the next chapter are also negatively influenced⁸⁰ by social norms regarding sexuality, however in their stories these norms are more often questioned and they focus more on the positive aspects of sexuality, such as desire and pleasure.

⁸⁰ By stating they are 'negatively influenced', I mean the development of their sexual subjectivity is hindered too.

3 – Questioning Norms

In this chapter I discuss the stories of Saar, Alex, Simone and Ruby, whom together form the second group of respondents. As discussed in the introduction women are categorised in three groups, inspired by the categorisation as put forward by Thompson (1990). The first category includes women who experience hindrances in developing their sexual subjectivity and experiencing sexual desire and pleasure. The third group includes pleasure narrators, and the second group consists of women falling in-between those two categories. Although the women in this chapter have been better able to develop their sexual subjectivity than the women in the previous chapter, they are not as pleasure-focused as women in the third category. In exploring the stories of Saar, Alex, Simone and Ruby, the following themes are coming up: beauty norms and body images, decreasing desire, non-normative gender identities and relationships, masturbation and pain.

3.1 Saar

I ended the previous chapter by discussing Madelyn's stories, who perfectly internalized society's beauty standards. It is interesting to compare her stories to those of Saar, who approaches beauty standards from a different angle. Saar is a Dutch white woman in her

twenties with blonde hair and a university education. She is heterosexual and has been in a relationship for five years. One of her earliest memories related to sexuality includes flipping through a porn magazine while her mother was somewhere else in the same store. The erotic pictures of women's bodies she saw interested her; she considered it weird that they created such a warm feeling in her genital area. These feelings surprised her since she was used to seeing naked people on naturist campsites. Only later she understood the relation between what she saw and felt.

As a child sexuality was freely discussed with her mother and brother. When Saar was about eight years old they watched 'Sex met Angela'⁸¹ together, a television program in which sexuality was discussed in an intimate and affirmative way. After watching the shows the topics that had come up were further discussed at home; doing so did not spark sexual feelings or desires in Saar, she merely was very interested in the subjects.

From the age of 14 Saar regularly masturbated, although at first this was not connected to sex; *"I pushed my legs together when I was in bed at night and I got an orgasm, this felt nice and it made me sleep well"*⁸² (Saar, 5). Only after she learned about masturbation in biology class some years later she started understanding it as sexual act and started using her fingers. In high school sexuality was not an important topic to Saar; although she regularly fell in love she was longing for emotional closeness rather than sexual closeness. This experience is in line with Tolman's understanding of girls' sexuality, as was also discussed in relation to Ivy's stories in the previous chapter; due to the persisting double standard, girls' sexuality is effectively desexualized as girls' sexual desire is substituted by a desire for emotional closeness (Tolman 2005). While girls' yearning for love and romance is encouraged, their sexual longings are not. When Saar had her first kiss at 16 she was not very impressed, but only after she had sex for the first time at 18 she gradually started discovering her own sexual preferences and feelings.

3.1.1 Realistic Body Image

Today, fantasy is an important part of Saar's sexuality. She mentions she can only orgasm when fantasising; there is a range of fantasies from which she chooses when she and her partner have sex. Stories she encounters in all forms can be the basis of a fantasy, be it something she once read, something she once saw on television or in a movie. While Saar considers porn itself to be little attractive and banal, reading the backside of a dvd can spark her fantasy, just like reading

⁸¹ Angela Groothuizen is a well-known singer, presenter and actress in the Netherlands. 'Sex met Angela' (Sex with Angela) was a television program that was broadcasted on national television in 1993 and 1994.

⁸² "[I]k drukte mijn benen samen als ik 's avonds in bed lag en dan kreeg ik een orgasme, dat voelde fijn en daarna sliep ik lekker" (Saar, 5).

stories on a Dutch website featuring 'horny stories'⁸³. Saar gives a short description of her fantasies and favourite sexual experiences:

*"Often women play a bigger role than men, it is about outdoor sex, between two people that do not know each other, or group-sex. (...) The sexual experiences that I most remember are the times we had sex outdoors (in open air, but with no other people around), something about that really turns me on. Even though it is often just impractical (mosquitoes, hard floor...)"*⁸⁴ (Saar, 8).

It is apparent that Saar is aware of what is sexually pleasurable and desirable to her and that she can articulate this; Saar is aroused by (fantasising about) outdoor sex. Similarly, Saar can clearly articulate how she experiences her body, and how her body image was influenced by her experiences on naturist campsites. In discussing to what extent her body plays a role in her experiences with sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy, Saar describes being accustomed to seeing naked bodies in all shapes and sizes. Due to these experiences Saar has been able to construct a *"realistic image of the human body, instead of by media exaggerated expectations"*⁸⁵ (Saar, 9). Saar points at expectations regarding bodies that are conveyed in media and understands these as exaggerated and artificial. Having seen many naked bodies, Saar knows there is a gap between 'real' bodies and bodies portrayed in media. Consequentially, she learned to appreciate her body the way it is, on top of which she is not prudish and feels secure about her body.

*"That's why I am also proud of my body during sex, it doesn't matter to me whether the lights are on or off, or whether there is a mirror in the room or not. In my sexual experience my body is just as important as my fantasies or mind: when I am being touched or have sex I enjoy the physical aspect"*⁸⁶ (Saar, 9).

Saar feels comfortable about her body and the way her body looks. Her body plays an important role in her sexual life, in combination with fantasies.

⁸³ Saar mentions the website geileverhalen.nl (hornystories.nl).

⁸⁴ *"Hierbij spelen vaak vrouwen een grotere rol dan mannen, gaat het vaak om seks in de buitenlucht, tussen 2 mensen die elkaar niet kennen, of groepsseks. (...) De seksuele ervaringen die me het meest bijstaan waren de keren dat we het buiten deden (in de open lucht, maar waar geen andere mensen waren), iets daaraan vind me erg op. Hoewel het vaak ook gewoon onpraktisch is (muggen, harde grond...)"* (Saar, 8).

⁸⁵ *"realistisch beeld heb over het menselijk lichaam, en geen door de media opgeblazen verwachting"* (Saar, 9).

⁸⁶ *"Daarom ben ik ook tijdens de seks trots op mijn lichaam, en maakt het me niet uit of het licht aan of uit is, en of er een spiegel in de kamer is of niet. Mijn lichaam is net zo belangrijk in mijn seksuele ervaring als mijn fantasieën of geest: als ik word aangeraakt of seks heb geniet ik erg van het lichamelijke aspect"* (Saar, 9).

3.1.2 Decreasing Desire

This story can be read as positive because Saar tells stories that are pleasure focused and she appears to feel confident about what she tells. However, there is a particular point about which Saar is insecure. Since a couple of years Saar feels less desire than before:

“Since about five years (I think partly because of using the pill) I feel less desire to have sex than before: before I could very strongly desire sex and try to ‘get someone in bed’, but since I have a steady relationship that has decreased a lot”⁸⁷ (Saar, 6).

Saar believes her decreasing desire is partly caused by taking contraceptive pills, yet she also mentions this coincided with the start of a steady relationship. Ten years ago she had solo sex on a daily basis; today she no longer desires to do so. Having sex is pleasurable but when this is not possible the thought of sex does not occupy her mind. Additionally, Saar can only orgasm when she fantasises. *“Sometimes I think this is problematic because I feel guilty about needing [fantasies] to reach an orgasm. Therefore my partner doesn’t know”⁸⁸ (Saar, 6).* Although she feels *“a lot of pleasure having sex (most of the time)”⁸⁹ (Saar, 6)*, she has to get herself in the mood by fantasising.

Saar’s sexual desire has decreased, as a result of which she needs fantasies in order to spark her desire, have sex and reach an orgasm. She partly attributes this to using contraceptives. Feeling guilty about needing fantasies, she does not tell her partner. But why would she feel guilty about her decreasing desire when she believes this is caused by using contraception? Perhaps she feels the need to keep the fantasising secret because she does not want to imply that her partner is not ‘good enough’. Only being able to reach an orgasm when fantasising might imply the sex she and her partner have is not ‘enough’ for her. It is apparent that Saar considers it problematic that her sexual desire has decreased. What might be derived from her keeping this a secret is that she feels the need to reach an orgasm. Perhaps this is not only to please herself, but also to please her partner. She needs to have an orgasm that is caused by his, or their combined, sexual actions, to prove she enjoys their sex. If this cannot be attained, this is reason to secretly stimulate herself by privately fantasising, so she can nevertheless show him how their sex makes her experience orgasms.

⁸⁷ *“Ook sinds een jaar of 5 (ik denk dat het gedeeltelijk door de pil komt) heb ik minder verlangen naar seks dan daarvoor: daarvoor kon ik heel sterk zin hebben in seks en proberen om iemand ‘het bed in the krijgen’ maar eigenlijk sinds mijn vaste relatie is dat veel minder geworden” (Saar, 6).*

⁸⁸ *“Dit vind ik soms vervelend want ik voel me daar dan schuldig over, dat ik dat nodig heb om tot een orgasme te komen. Mijn partner weet dit dan ook niet” (Saar, 6).*

⁸⁹ *“Maar ik geniet er (meestal) wel van” (Saar, 6).*

3.1.3 Overt and Covert Norms

The sexual stories that are collected for this study encompass different types of norms influencing women's sexuality. While some (repressive) norms are specifically mentioned as such, others play a more covert role in the stories and go unrecognized as such. Some women discuss norms by stating how they restrict and negatively affect them. Generally, repressive norms can be considered overt when actively defined as such by a respondent, while they can be considered covert when not specifically defined as such. Repressive norms might stay hidden because women do not wish to discuss them or think they are not part of this research, because of its focus on sexual desire and pleasure. However, they might also stay hidden because women are not aware of their existence. Saar's story is relevant because she overtly questions and defies beauty and body image norms. Being raised in a family where nakedness was normal and visiting naturist campsites was commonplace, Saar learned to feel confident about her body.

Although Saar experiences decreases in desire, she appears to be a woman who knows what she enjoys. She was raised in a safe environment where she learned what real bodies look like and where they discussed topics related to sexuality. This upbringing has allowed Saar to question current beauty standards in a way that Madelyn is not able to; Saar's body image does not restrict the development of her sexual subjectivity. As such, while a covert norm (having to reach an orgasm to please a partner) is not even questioned, an overt norm (concerning beauty standards and body image) is defied in her stories.

3.2 Alex

In this study not all respondents identified as woman. Alex' sex is female but they identify as gender fluid or non-binary⁹⁰. Alex is a pansexual, Dutch student in their late twenties. They are in an open relationship with a cisgendered man⁹¹. The first time Alex had sexual feelings was when playing a 'chase and catch' game with a friend in which the winner locked up the loser; the excitement was in being chased and caught, combined with the physical aspect of being held.

⁹⁰ Because Alex defines as gender fluid or non-binary, they will be addressed by gender neutral pronouns such as 'their' and 'they' instead of 'her' and 'she' (see for instance Foertsch and Gernsbacher 1997).

⁹¹ The term 'cis' derives from the Latin *cis*, meaning "on the same side as"; one's gender identity and the sex assigned at birth are 'on the same side'. "Using the term cisgender is a way of distinguishing people who do not identify themselves as transgender without the implications of normalcy and determinism that come from terms like "biological woman" or the power implied in assuming that when one says simply "woman" that one means a nontransgender woman" (Stryker 2008 in Markman 2011, 315). Therefore, generally a cisgender man can be understood a man whose sex and gender are both male, while a transgender is a person whose sex does not match their gender (which can be one of many different gender identities).

3.2.1 Fulfilling Fantasies

Although sexuality is important in Alex's relationship with their partner, Alex does not consider it as a particularly important part of daily life. Sex barely occupies Alex's mind when working, although it is nice to discuss with likeminded friends. In busy periods Alex can forget about sex, but generally they desire sex and enjoy having sex. For Alex sex is a particularly pleasurable part of life: *"When I have sex, I really enjoy it. For me it is a moment to not think about anything, to relax"*⁹² (Alex, 6). Alex and their partner experience pleasure in fantasising: *"Fantasies play an important role for me, especially sharing joint fantasies with my partner while talking or role playing"*⁹³ (Alex, 6). Together they enjoy fulfilling these fantasies:

*"At the moment a desire I often think about is to watch my boyfriend having sex with another woman. This happened once and really pleased me. He feels less comfortable about this but does enjoy talking about it to me because I enjoy it. The specific desire is looking at it and maybe also talking to her/kissing her as it happens"*⁹⁴ (Alex, 8).

This quote implies that throughout time there have been different desires/fantasies that pleased Alex. At first Alex's current desire or fantasy appears to be seeing their partner having sex with another woman. Alex considers it pleasurable to see their partner experience pleasure with someone else without being part of the experience, but also in taking part in the experience by talking to the woman and kissing her.

3.2.2 Discovering Subcultures

Throughout time, the most important change that occurred for Alex was the development of self-knowledge: *"I gradually found out that there exist names and subcultures for the various feelings that I had/things I considered interesting"*⁹⁵ (Alex, 5). Alex introduces themselves as gender fluid, pansexual and in an open relationship. Following this self-description, it is probable that the subcultures Alex is pointing at here are those that allow for non-normative forms and expressions of gender, sexuality and relationships. Alex implies here that they found support in

⁹² *"Als ik seks heb, geniet ik daar erg van. Het is voor mij een moment om even nergens aan te denken, van ontspanning"* (Alex, 6).

⁹³ *"Fantasieën spelen voor mij een grote rol, voornamelijk het delen van gezamenlijke fantasieën met mijn partner in gesprek of rollenspel"* (Alex, 6).

⁹⁴ *"Op dit moment is een verlangen waar ik vaak aan denk om mijn vriend seks te zien hebben met een andere vrouw. Dat is eenmaal gebeurd en is me erg goed bevallen. Hij voelt zich daar minder comfortabel bij maar vind het wel leuk om er met me over te praten omdat ik het prettig vind. Het specifieke verlangen is dat ik ernaar wil kijken en misschien ook met haar wil praten en/of zoenen terwijl het gebeurt"* (Alex, 8).

⁹⁵ *"Ik kwam er gaandeweg achter dat er namen en subculturen bestonden voor de verschillende gevoelens die ik had"* (Alex, 5).

these subcultures.

Like in Saar's stories, some norms are questioned in Alex's stories while others are not. Although Alex must have questioned societal norms concerning gender and sexuality before being able to define themselves as gender fluid, pansexual and in an open relationship, Alex does not seem to be aware of how their body plays a role in experiences with sexual desires, pleasures and fantasies:

"Barely, for me sexual desire is disconnected from my body. On the other hand I might feel extra connected to my body as I feel comfortable in it. But sexuality mostly takes place in my head"⁹⁶ (Alex, 9).

Although Alex's answers to the other questions are to the point and clear, they do not have a clear answer to this question. First Alex argues that 'sexual desire is disconnected from their body', but then considers how this might be untrue because they 'feel comfortable in their body'. Alex chose to understand themselves using non-normative categories, thereby defying norms. However, Alex seems not to have actively considered their body in terms of sexual desires and pleasures. Like Saar, some norms are actively questioned and defied; in this case these involve the social categories according to which Alex understands themselves. Other norms are not considered at all; here this includes the sexual feelings of a body. Which norms are overt and which are covert, perhaps depends on a person's background and interests.

3.3 Simone

Simone is a Dutch woman in her early twenties, receiving higher education. She is lesbian and has been in a relationship for three years. Simone enjoys talking about sex and regularly does so; writing down and sharing her stories in this study does not feel strange to her. The stories she shares are quite pleasure focused. As a girl Simone discovered touching herself felt nice; while watching television she put her hand on her mons pubis, which felt warm and nice within the shape of her hand. She describes that somehow she relocated her hand and that way discovered how it felt to touch herself 'lower' than her mons pubis. Although she does not remember when and how this happened, it did make her feel good; apart from feeling warm and nice, she got wet.

⁹⁶ *Nauwelijks, seksueel verlangen is voor mij vrij losgekoppeld van mijn lichaam. Aan de andere kant ben ik misschien juist ook wel weer erg verbonden met mijn lichaam omdat ik me er comfortabel in voel. Maar seksualiteit speelt zich vooral in mijn hoofd af"* (Alex, 9).

3.3.1 Masturbation

As a girl Simone masturbated; she touched herself in a way that made her experience sexual pleasure. Like Simone, many women in this study describe masturbation as part of their earlier or current sexual experiences. At age 6, Daphne learned it felt nice when she touched her crotch. Saar started masturbating at age 14 by pushing her legs together and later by touching herself using her fingers. Madelyn has solo sex when being aroused by stimuli in her environment. Being a virgin, Heather's sex life consists of solo sex. Many women describing masturbation in this study appear to consider it unproblematic and natural⁹⁷. But what does it mean to masturbate? What are the implications of perceiving masturbation as such within this study?

Historically, female (hetero)sexuality is considered as behaviour that should either aim for reproduction or for achieving male sexual pleasure (Rich 1980). This definition leaves no room for women's sexual desire and pleasure, let alone for a solitary act as masturbation. As such, female sexual desire and pleasure, and masturbation in specific, are examples of sexual excess (McClelland and Fine 2008). Desire implies a 'wanting' and this wanting is a powerful statement that appears mutually exclusive with repressive societal norms regarding women, such as telling them to be sexy but not sexual. Within this narrative masturbation plays a significant role. It is the top of excess; from the start its goals are neither reproduction nor sexually pleasuring a man (Bowman 2014). Therefore, "when a woman masturbates, she experiences her sexuality in a way that does not conform to dominant expectations of femininity or female sexuality" (idem, 364).

According to Bowman's (2014) quantitative research on sex positive women's experiences of masturbation, the most important feelings women experience when masturbating fell under the heading of 'sexual empowerment'; they felt powerful, strong, sexy, independent and satisfied. The most important reasons women provided for masturbating included sexual pleasure, learning about or better understanding their bodies, as a release, as substitute for partner sex, and because of general sexual dissatisfaction with other sexual experiences.

Altogether it can be argued that the experiences caused by masturbation as described by Bowman (2014) allow for the development of a sexual subjectivity. At least two points of Tolman's (2005) definition of a healthy sexual subjectivity are present here. As was discussed in the introductory chapter, according to Tolman developing a healthy sexual subjectivity encompasses a "person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being" (Tolman 2005, 6). In this case, when a woman actively chooses to masturbate, this means

⁹⁷ Chloe is the only woman who mentions having experienced masturbation as dirty for some time.

she is making an active choice to have that sexual experience. And second, it implies that she feels entitled to the sexual pleasure that she is causing herself. Of course these points are related to the other points that are identified by Tolman, including that a woman experiences herself as sexual being and that she has an identity as sexual being. What is specifically interesting about masturbation is that it has the potential to support women's development of their sexual subjectivity without the necessary involvement of a partner or other person. Masturbation is also mentioned by Thompson (1990) as one of the factors that predict whether a girl is a pleasure narrator or not. In Simone's stories experiences with masturbation might have supported the development of her sexual subjectivity, which is the foundation of the experiences she has today and which she understands as rather positive.

3.3.2 Switching of Senses

As a child, Simone discovered her body and the feelings it could produce. Ever since, the largest change in her sexuality is that she gained knowledge and had sexual experiences with others. Although Simone's experiences changed, she states her perception of sexuality did not; ever since she started masturbating she always considered sexuality as something positive. Altogether, sex plays an important role in Simone's life:

*"Sex is important to me. I enjoy it, it is good for my confidence and self-esteem and it makes me happy. When I do not have enough sex, I become grumpy and a bit sad"*⁹⁸ (Simone, 6).

When describing the role sexuality plays in her life, Simone mentions how her confidence, self-esteem and happiness are all positively influenced by having sex. On top of that she states: *"I consider myself as sexual person and that influences your daily life"*⁹⁹ (Simone, 7). As such, Simone appears to have been able to construct a healthy sexual subjectivity as defined by Tolman (2005); she understands herself as sexual person and feels empowered by her sexual experiences. She knows what sexual experiences are particularly pleasurable to her:

*"The first thing that comes to my mind is that I discovered the intensity of eliminating one sense organ while having sex. For instance when turning of the light or being blindfolded (sight switched off), or being tied up (tactile sense switched off), your experience of other senses intensifies. I still enjoy having sex in total darkness. It gives an extra dimension to it."*¹⁰⁰ (Simone, 8).

⁹⁸ *"Seks is belangrijk voor me. Ik vind het fijn, het is goed voor mijn zelfvertrouwen en mijn gevoel van eigenwaarde, en ik word er blij van. Als ik te weinig seks heb, ben ik knorrig en een beetje sip"* (Simone, 6).

⁹⁹ *"Ik beschouw mezelf wel als seksueel persoon, en dat werkt door in je dagelijks leven"* (Simone, 7).

¹⁰⁰ *"Het eerste dat in me opkomt, is denk ik dat ik ontdekte hoe intens het is om één zintuig uit te schakelen tijdens de seks. Door bijvoorbeeld het licht uit te doen/een blinddoek voor te doen (zicht uitgeschakeld) of*

Simone enjoys the elimination of one sense in order to intensify the experience of other senses. This is what she 'discovered' during past sexual experiences; presumably she experienced enough sexual safety to experiment and switch off specific senses. Overall, her stories read as pleasure focused. Thus far Simone has not implicated obstacles related to her sexual experiences and sexual pleasure. As was mentioned above, she appears to have constructed a positive sexual self and a healthy sexual subjectivity.

3.3.3 Vibrating Belly

However, this analysis is problematized when considering Simone's body image. Thus far she did not elaborate on the role her body plays in sexuality, but merely discussed aspects of sexuality with positive connotations. Nevertheless, when asked to describe the role her body plays in sexuality she explains having a negative body image:

"I have a low self-image and I experience my body in fairly negative terms. Still, this never really played a role during sex (luckily!). Occasionally when I really feel bad, I worry about whether my belly 'vibrates' during sex, which my partner could consider unattractive. But generally I consider my body as something positive while I have sex"¹⁰¹ (Simone, 9).

Without any other references to a negative self-image and body image or its causes, Simone describes her negative body image and its potential influence on sex, only to quickly say this rarely influences her sex life. Like in Madelyn's and other women's stories, a negative body image is again of influence. Worrying about her physical appearance can distract Simone from her sexual experiences. Perhaps it could even be inferred that Simone's pleasure in turning off the light during sex can (at least partly) be understood by this negative body image; with the lights switched off her partner cannot see her belly 'vibrating'. Although this does not eliminate the risk of feeling vibrations, not being able to be seen might make Simone feel more comfortable. When her partner cannot see the vibration, she cannot consider it unattractive either.

Like Saar's and Alex's stories, Simone's stories show how different norms influence women in contradictory ways. Her positive understanding of masturbation, the most important

vastgebonden te zijn (tastzin uitgeschakeld), ervaar je al het andere des te intenser. Ik heb nog steeds graag seks in totale donkerte. Het geeft er een extra dimensie aan" (Simone, 8).

¹⁰¹ *"Ik heb een laag zelfbeeld en ben behoorlijk negatief over mijn lichaam. Toch heeft dat tijdens de seks nooit een rol gespeeld (gelukkig!). Heel af en toe, als ik me heel slecht voel, maak ik me tijdens het vrijen druk over of mijn buik niet 'trilt' en mijn partner dat onaantrekkelijk zou kunnen vinden. Maar over het algemeen zie ik mijn lichaam als iets positiefs terwijl ik seks heb"* (Simone, 9).

example of excessive women's sexuality according to McClelland and Fine (2008), might have a positive influence on the development of her sexual self. However, there is also an important negative influence, involving the problematic consequences of repressive societal beauty norms.

3.4 Ruby

Ruby is a woman who responded to the survey by telling elaborate and detailed stories. She is in her mid-twenties and considers herself bi-curious; although she only had relationships with men, she feels increasingly attracted to women and wonders whether she could be in a relationship with a woman in the future. Similarly she is interested in polyamory, but has not been in a polyamorous relationship thus far. Ruby likes discussing sexuality; she enjoys both telling her stories and hearing the stories of others. In her responses she even calls for the founding of a support group, a space to freely and openly discuss sexuality. One of the themes that are discussed by Ruby, is pain. Although norms related to body image and beauty have been discussed by multiple women thus far, norms related to experiencing pain have not yet been explored. Ruby's stories allow for an exploration of societal norms concerning pain during sex.

3.4.1 Pain

Ruby explains that she only retrospectively defined her first sexual feelings as such; while playing with her toys she fantasised about a story focusing on dominance and submission. Since then large changes occurred in her sexual experiences, which she explores by means of a timeline that is based on several (ex-)partners. Ruby's story started in puberty, when she was afraid to experience pain during her first coitus; her fear was so extensive that she considered getting therapy. Eventually she barely experienced pain during her first time; whenever she started to feel pain she and her partner stopped and tried it again later. Ruby discusses that she has always been taken aback by the societal standard that teaches girls it is normal to experience pain when being penetrated for the first time:

"I have always been very taken aback by girls who just 'pushed through' and had a painful defloration. I have always strongly resisted this and refused to suffer pain just so a boy could have sex. One of my ex-boyfriends once pushed me by saying "it will

*only hurt once and many girls do it". I was (and in fact still am) fucking mad about this. The fact that he could say this implies that apparently it is socially accepted"*¹⁰² (Ruby, 5).

Thompson (1990) elaborates on pain in her study on 'pleasure narrators' and 'just happened narrators'¹⁰³ and argues that 'just happened narrators' often tell stories about pain when describing their first coitus. This group is characterized by a lack of understanding of what is about to happen. Having sex happens often happens too quickly and without the necessary foreplay, as a result of which they are overcome by pain. And although these girls blame their partners for emotional pain in their relationship, they blame their own bodies for the pain they experience during their first coitus (Thompson 1990).

As Ruby suggests, experiencing pain during sex is not uncommon for girls and women. In 2005, research focusing on sexual health in the Netherlands found that one in ten girls reported pain at least regularly (Vanwesenbeeck 2011). Even thirty percent of Dutch women reported experiencing pain sometimes, six percent of whom experiences pain regularly or often (Dielissen and Dekker 2011). Although this pain can be caused by many different factors, the double standard's repressive influence on girls' sexual development is an important cause (Vanwesenbeeck 2011). For Ruby, it is problematic that pain is generally considered to be a normal aspect of sex. She cannot understand that girls accept this and that boys enforce this norm. Therefore she actively chose to 'resist' this social norm and to 'refuse to suffer pain'. Making sure her partner stopped whenever she started having pain, she actively defended her own sexual desire and pleasure.

3.4.2 Developing a Sexual Self

The biggest developments in Ruby's sexual life happened when she was together with another ex-partner; she felt comfortable being naked around him and together with him she reached her first orgasm. Despite the positive development she experienced, she also discusses problems in their relationship. Her ex-partner more often desired having sex than Ruby, as a result of which he persuaded her. When her ex-partner was able to persuade Ruby, she enjoyed the sex. However, this basis for having sex was problematic for Ruby, because it did not allow her to develop sexual desire herself. Before wanting sex, or being ready to have sex, she was already having sex. This situation was also problematic to her ex-partner, as in his experience he always

¹⁰² *"Ik heb me altijd erg verbaasd over de meisjes die maar 'gewoon doorzetten' en een pijnlijke ontmaagding hebben gehad. Ik heb me daar heel sterk tegen verzet en weigerde pijn te lijden puur zodat de jongen maar seks kon hebben. Een ex vriendje heeft me een keer gepusht door te zeggen "het doet maar 1x pijn en zoveel meisjes doen dat". Ik was (en ben eigenlijk nog steeds) fucking kwaad hierover. Het feit dat hij dit kon zeggen en dat het dus schijnbaar zo sociaal geaccepteerd is"* (Ruby, 5).

¹⁰³ Tolman's study (1990) was also discussed in the Introduction and in section 2.1 'Exploring Stories'.

had to work hard to persuade her, even though they both knew she would eventually enjoy the sex. Why then, did he have to convince her? Although she was able to develop her sexual self with this ex-partner, her overall evaluation of their sexual relationship appears relatively negative.

Ruby describes the sexual relationship she has with her current partner as much better; they have a strong sexual connection and she can now really experience sexual pleasure. She more often desires having sex and only rarely does not desire sex while her partner does. When such a situation occurs, her partner does not attempt to persuade her. Instead he understands that she would enjoy sex because her erogenous zones are touched, although this enjoyment cannot be compared to the pleasure she would experience if she desired sex without being persuaded. Ruby is very happy with the developments she experiences in her relationship; with her partner she was able to experience both vaginal and multiple orgasms. These experiences are very valuable to Ruby.

Within this story Ruby points at important topics related to women's sexuality. She discusses the social acceptance of the pain which girls and women can experience during sex. Also, she hints at the relational aspect of sexuality by exploring the story of her sexual development on the basis of her subsequent partners. Her story is a progressive narrative; first the focus was on a fear for pain, then she developed her sexual self but experienced conflicts with her ex-partner. She has never been as content with her sex life as she is today with her current partner, although she thinks her sex life might be even better in the future when she had the chance to further develop her sexual self. Interestingly, this story progresses from one partner to the next. In discussing three partners she developed from being afraid of pain to being very content with her sex life. She barely mentions any developments which might have occurred outside of those relationships. For instance, she only shortly states she started masturbating at 22, without elaborating on its role for the development of her sexual self. As such, her story is both a progressive and relational narrative.

Sexual desire and pleasure are at the heart of her perception of sexuality. Ruby desires having sex and experiences pleasure when fantasising about sex, either about her partner or about having a threesome with her partner and another woman. Sex is positively related to many aspects of her life:

"When I am happy I fantasize more about sex and feel a stronger desire to have sex. These fantasies and desires then make me even happier and alive. Although, when they

*are not satisfied this can get frustrating after some time. Generally I associate sex with a lust for life. The happier I am, the hornier I am*¹⁰⁴ (Ruby, 7).

This quote in particular shows the relationship between sexual health and health in general; someone that is happy about her sex life is happy to have sex, which increases her lust for life to such an extent that ‘the happier she is, the hornier she is’. Interestingly, in Ruby’s case this happiness is relational and depends on her partner. She loves receiving oral sex, “*mainly because my boyfriend is very good at it and he really enjoys giving it*”¹⁰⁵ (Ruby, 8). Because Ruby’s partner enjoys giving oral sex, she feels relaxed and experiences no pressure to quickly reach an orgasm. Ruby feels pleasure because her partner feels pleasure:

*“[I feel pleasure when I] feel him deep within me, hear him groan with pleasure when I give a blowjob or kiss his neck, hear him come within me. (...) My fantasies focus on me noticing that a man experiences a lot of pleasure having sex with me. In fantasies I focus on the man’s pleasure, because I love to notice that someone wants to have sex with me so badly”*¹⁰⁶ (Ruby, 8)

To a certain extent Ruby can be considered a pleasure narrator; she discusses how she experiences pleasure and how this positively affects her happiness. However, her story is complicated by the relational aspect. Her focus is on her partner; when he experiences pleasure she does too. When she experiences pleasure that is distinct from what her partner can see or know, this is problematic for Ruby. For instance, Ruby enjoys fantasising when receiving oral sex, but like Saar feels guilty about this because she often does not fantasize about her partner. In combination with the above quotes this is striking when comparing it to her strong refusal to experience pain in sex just so her partner can experience sex. It is as if she can only be a sexual being when her partner allows her too.

¹⁰⁴ “Als ik blij ben fantaseer ik meer over seks en verlang ik meer naar seks. Deze fantasieën en verlangens maken me dan vaak nog blijer en levenslustiger. Alhoewel, als ze niet bevredigd worden kan dat na een tijdje frustrerend worden. Over het algemeen associeer ik mijn seksualiteit met levenslust. Hoe blijer ik ben, hoe geiler ik ben” (Ruby, 7).

¹⁰⁵ “voornamelijk omdat mijn vriend er heel goed in is en hij er zelf heel erg van geniet om het te geven” (Ruby, 8).

¹⁰⁶ “Hem diep in me voelen, hem horen kreunen en hem meer horen genieten als ik hem pijp of hem in zijn nek zoen, hem horen klaarkomen in mij. (...) Mijn fantasieën zijn voornamelijk dat ik merk dat een man er heel erg van geniet om met mij seks te hebben. Ik richt me in mijn fantasieën meer op het genot van de man, omdat ik het heerlijk vind om te merken dat iemand met mij zo graag seks wil” (Ruby, 8).

3.4.3 Body as Buddy

Within her current relationship Ruby increasingly learned to appreciate her body in sexual terms; she describes that her body is increasingly becoming her “buddy”¹⁰⁷ (Ruby, 9). Because of experiencing vaginal and multiple orgasms, she started to perceive her body more positively. These experiences increased her appreciation of her body and encouraged her to explore its possibilities. However, despite this increasing appreciation of the way her body can feel, her perception of her body’s looks is less positive: “During sex I do not really feel insecure about my body. In fact I do not really think about it. If I would, I would probably feel insecure”¹⁰⁸ (Ruby, 9). What does this mean? Why would Ruby be insecure about her body if she would think about it? What would she be insecure about? Perhaps about how her body looks. Perhaps about her body’s responses on being touched; she enjoys her body’s responses and considers her them as more enthusiastic than other women’s bodily responses. Possibly it is exactly these ‘enthusiastic’ responses that she could also be ashamed of.

On the one hand Ruby questions and defies norms regarding how her body feels and experiences sexuality. On the other hand Ruby is very dependent on her partner; he needs to allow her to feel pleasure and be beautiful. The development of her sexual subjectivity happens on a relational rather than an autonomous basis; approval is a crucial topic in her stories. She is potentially ashamed of her body on top of which she feels ashamed of her stories; she is afraid others might read them and recognize her. Although she enjoys discussing sexuality and feels the need to share her stories, she is afraid that others might disapprove of them. Also, she feels ashamed of her early sexual experiences. These stories indicate how difficult it is for women to understand themselves as autonomous sexual beings.

3.5 Concluding Remarks

Each woman in this chapter is influenced by multiple norms, some of which are questioned and defied while others are not. They can be positioned in the spaces in-between the women whose sexual desires are largely repressed and the ones that can be considered pleasure narrators.

Each woman triggered specific emotions, thoughts and feelings within me. For instance, the gender-neutral approach I followed in discussing Alex’s stories raised questions. In one of the quotes, Alex describes desiring to see their partner having sex with *another* woman, thereby identifying as woman themselves. This single word made me question my gender-neutral

¹⁰⁷ “buddy” is the exact word Ruby uses.

¹⁰⁸ “Ik ben tijdens de seks niet echt onzeker over mijn lichaam. Eigenlijk denk ik er gewoon niet over na. Als ik dat wel zou doen, zou ik het waarschijnlijk wel zijn” (Ruby, 9).

approach; it feels problematic to approach someone that identifies as gender fluid or non-binary with female pronouns, but also to approach a woman-identified woman with (unwanted) gender neutral pronouns. The fact that Alex participated in this study, which specifically aims at women, does not provide an answer here, as Alex can have decided to participate on the basis of their female sex. This would be in line with Gatens (2006) perception of 'women' as cluster concept. As discussed in the first chapter, there are multiple factors that can make one woman, but these factors do not necessarily all have to apply to one woman. Eventually I choose Alex' self-description as gender fluid or non-binary as guideline and continued using gender-neutral pronouns.

Ruby's active refusal of pain during the first coitus felt very personal. As I discussed in the first chapter, I experienced pain during intercourse for several years. As such, Ruby and I were influenced in different ways by the same norm. While she was able to question this norm and refuse such experiences, I was not aware this was even possible. I was one of the girls who 'just pushed through', one of the girls by whom Ruby was 'very taken aback'. Feeling a bit envious about her capabilities of refusing pain made me aware of how personal a study like this one is; the stories not only have the power to interest me, excite me, spark desires in me, but also have the power to trouble and confuse me. It was to be expected that many different emotions would be triggered within me, as Tolman also discusses (2005). As previously explained, I account for those feelings in order to increase the feminist objectivity of this report.

In this chapter it has become apparent how important it is to be aware of norms and to have the means to question those norms. Saar, Alex, Simone and Ruby are positioned in the second category of women, the group in-between, because they are questioning some norms, while not others. Although they appear to be pleasure narrators at first side, there are specific norms which problematise this categorization; the norms which women are aware of are questioned, while the ones they are not aware of still hinder the development of their sexual subjectivity.

4 – Narrating Pleasure

In this chapter the stories of Chloe, Daphne, Jasmin and Hazel are explored. These women are grouped together because in relation to the women in the previous chapter, they are more pleasure focused and better able to question norms. As such, the women in this chapter are categorized as pleasure narrators; they choose to focus on pleasure without feeling guilty about this in some way. They are aware of how their upbringing has silenced the development of their sexual subjectivity, and they have actively chosen not to accept this and to fight the norms they were taught. Although these women are pleasure narrators, this does not imply that they are in no way troubled by the prevailing norms regarding women's sexuality. In Chloe's, Daphne's, Jasmin's and Hazel's stories a new set of topics is brought up, including parents as disciplining power, defying taboos, women's orgasm and sexual perversions.

4.1 Chloe

Chloe is a "very *hetero*"¹⁰⁹ (Chloe, 1) woman in her mid-twenties who considers herself very open about sex and enjoys discussing it with her partner, friends and parents. Already when introducing herself she mentions her 'first times'; after experiencing her first orgasm when aged

¹⁰⁹ "heel erg hetero" (Chloe, 1).

7 “(yes 7)”¹¹⁰ (Chloe, 1), and her first French kiss at 19, she had sex for the first time at 20. Chloe tells stories about desire and knows what is pleasurable to her.

As a young girl, she loved the feeling of sitting with one leg on each side of the sofa’s corner, since pressuring her body the right way stimulated not only her clitoris but her entire vulva. She looked at the pictures in ‘Rooie Oortjes’¹¹¹, which aroused a nice kind of adrenaline in her body. Also she describes investigating and comparing bodies with two boys at age four, asking questions like “*Do I have another hole down there?*”¹¹² (Chloe, 3).

As a child Chloe was openly interested in sex and sexuality, but during puberty she became more silent on the topic. She no longer wanted to discuss it and stopped masturbating for some years because she considered it dirty to touch herself ‘down there’. At the end of puberty her feelings changed again and she restarted her investigation of pleasure. Ever since, she has grown more confident about herself. Today she considers herself beautiful both for her personality and her body (physical appearance). She states to have a partner with whom she has pleasurable sex, and although (the thought of) sex does not dominate her life, sex is very important to her.

4.1.1 Desiring to See

There is one particular act that persistently sparks Chloe’s desire; she finds it pleasurable to be able to see what happens. During sex she likes to fantasise about taking a distance in order to watch the scene from a different standpoint. Also, she takes pleasure in seeing how she is being penetrated by her partner:

*“Last week I had very good sex with my boyfriend, as I sat on top and I was able to control the rhythm. What was particularly good about it and what stimulated me incredibly at that moment was that I continually felt the head of his penis enter me from a specific angle so I could feel the edge very clearly at the opening of my labia, after which I slid over him abruptly so he would enter me deeply. Simultaneously I pleased myself and I came. My boyfriend came short after”*¹¹³ (Chloe, 8).

¹¹⁰ “(ja 7)” (Chloe, 1).

¹¹¹ Rooie Oortjes is a Dutch comic book “with sexy humour for a large audience, young and old” (rooie-oortjes.nl).

¹¹² “Heb ik dan nog een gaatje daar beneden dan?” (Chloe, 4).

¹¹³ “Afgelopen week heb ik hele goede seks gehad met mijn vriend waarop ik bovenop zat en ik heel erg kon beheersen hoe het ritme ging. Wat het specifiek lekker voor mij maakte en mij op dat moment ongelooflijk stimuleerde was dat ik steeds de eikel van zijn penis vanuit een bepaalde hoek bij mij naar binnen liet gaan zodat ik de rand van zijn eikel heel duidelijk voelde bij de opening van mijn schaamlippen, waarna ik

In this experience Chloe is very active. She is aware of her desires and actively pursues experiencing pleasure. She 'sits on top' and 'controls the rhythm'. Her partner's penis enters her vagina, but only as she 'slid over him abruptly' as she wants him to 'enter her deeply'. Simultaneously pleasuring herself, Chloe has an active role in this experience; she knows what she wants, she acts to get it and knows how to articulate this in her stories. She describes that she enjoys watching her partner enter her vagina from below, *"to see his penis disappear in me as I look down and I can imagine very well how the edges of his glans stimulate the entrance of my vagina"*¹¹⁴ (Chloe, 8). The visual aspect of this sexual situation is very important. Chloe enjoys seeing how her body is capable of letting her partner's penis 'disappear'.

In this study there have been other women who did not know what they wanted, and if they did, who were afraid to pursue what they wanted. This story is telling because of Chloe's active role in it. She is not afraid to know what she wants, neither to get what she wants and to experience the pleasure this causes. This is the case, even though there has been a time in which Chloe considered sex taboo. Despite the hindrances she encountered in developing her sexual subjectivity, she has been able to develop into a pleasure narrator.

4.1.2 Being Sexual

The experience that Chloe describes in the above quote not only concerns what she thinks and feels, it is a very physical experience due to the obvious presence of the body. While most women in this study write about their desires and fantasies without taking into account their body, Chloe actively includes her body in the experience. When specifically asked about the role her body plays in experiences with sexuality, she explores how particular body parts feel when being aroused:

*"Of course my body plays an enormous role in sexual experience. Especially my groin is sensitive, in a tickling but also stimulating way. But generally my erogenous zones that are really actively stimulating are located in my crotch. Sometimes my nipples are sensitive and I enjoy being kissed on my neck, but the real sex-zones are situated in my crotch"*¹¹⁵ (Chloe, 9).

sporadisch abrupt over hem heen gleed zodat hij diep bij mij naar binnen schoot. Hierbij bevredigde ik mezelf en kwam ik klaar. Mijn vriend kwam kort daarna" (Chloe, 8).

¹¹⁴ *"[D]e penis in mij zie verdwijnen als ik omlaag kijk en me heel goed kan voorstellen hoe zijn eikel de ingang van mijn vagina stimuleerde"* (Chloe, 8).

¹¹⁵ *"Mijn lichaam speelt natuurlijk een enorme rol bij mij seksuele ervaring. Mijn liezen zijn vooral gevoelig, op een kietelige maar ook weer stimulerende manier. Maar over het algemeen zijn mijn erogene zones die echt actief stimuleren allemaal in mijn kruis. Soms zijn mijn tepels wel eens gevoelig en vind ik het fijn om in mijn hals en nek gekust te worden maar de echte sekszones zijn gelegen in mijn kruis"* (Chloe, 9).

As she describes her body, it becomes apparent that Chloe feels confident about herself. She can articulate which are the bodily erogenous zones that can cause her to experience pleasure. Apart from that she mentions having a positive body image and enjoying the visual parts of having sex. She openly discusses sex and responding to the survey excites her, *“the question about my specific sexual experience has really turned me on again and now I regret that my boyfriend isn’t home yet :P”*¹¹⁶ (Chloe, 10).

Altogether Chloe’s story is a story about pleasure. Still, some covert taboos are present in her stories, although not elaborately discussed. While stating that she feels confident about her body, this statement is followed by an exception.

*“I am pretty confident about my body. I enjoy seeing myself in the mirror while we have sex, but I find it unpleasant to see my face because strangely enough it stops me from being in the moment. It makes me too aware of myself. But apart from that I want to see everything”*¹¹⁷ (Chloe, 9).

If Chloe is confident about both her personality and physical appearance and she is aroused by seeing her own and her partner’s body together, why does she stop ‘being in the moment’ when seeing her face? Probably Chloe’s face shows signs of arousal at such moments. Perhaps these signs of arousal portrayed on her face remind Chloe of herself as sexual being. Perhaps having grown up in our society with its social norms prohibiting women to be sexual beings, it is problematic for Chloe to engage with herself as such directly.

4.1.3 Teenage Taboo

Within her stories Chloe explores various social norms concerning (female) sexuality. Chloe describes reading the comic books ‘Rooie Oortjes’, which were located on the lowest shelf in the store where she read them. She does not understand why these books, filled with ‘sexy comics’, were on the lowest shelf. This location allows children to access these books and the images and stories in them. Perhaps it can be derived that children should not be able to encounter these comics. This is in accordance with the societal believe that children are ‘pure’ and should be protected from encountering sex in any form¹¹⁸. However, this is not compliant with the way sexuality already played a role in Chloe’s life as a child. She recalls having sexual feelings sitting

¹¹⁶ *“De vraag naar mijn specifieke seksuele ervaring wond me overigens weer op en ik baal nu dat mijn vriend nog niet thuis is :P”* (Chloe, 10).

¹¹⁷ *“Verder ben ik behoorlijk zeker over mijn lichaam. Ik vind het leuk om mezelf in een spiegel te zien terwijl we seks hebben, maar ik vind het onprettig om mijn gezicht te zien omdat dat mij gek genoeg uit het moment haalt. Dan word ik me te bewust van mijzelf. Maar verder wil ik alles zien”* (Chloe, 9).

¹¹⁸ As also described by Foucault (1998).

on the edge of the sofa; she recalls investigating her body together with friends. Although these occasions might have been more about research than about sex, they do tell that sex and the body play a role in children's lives, despite it being taboo.

That sexuality plays an important role in childhood also becomes apparent in the stories of other women. Hazel 'secretly' watched informational programs on television concerning sex. Jasmin knew as a preschooler sex was wrong and dirty, but was really interested in the difference between having sex and fucking. Noor never told anyone she used to play 'little rapist' with the girls next door. As young girls they had sexual experiences, which they knew they should not be having or should at least keep secret.

For Chloe, a taboo on sex was further developed as puberty started and sex became a private topic: *"I had periods in which I did not masturbate for years. I thought it was dirty to touch myself down there. Eventually it is the area from which you pee"*¹¹⁹ (Chloe, 5). The reason for not masturbating is that the vulva is not only a place of pleasure but also the place from 'which you pee'. Chloe's words indicate that she masturbated before that time; why then did her perception of her vulva change from a place of pleasure to a place that should not be touched? Would this be the consequence of a particular event or multiple events together? Have these events been informed by societal norms regarding women's sexuality, desire and pleasure? It is possible that Chloe learned she was too young to be sexual and to develop her sexual self.

Chloe internalized social norms regarding (women's) sexuality and thereby repressed her sexual feelings. At the end of puberty she rediscovered sex and started exploring her desires and pleasures. Overall, although perhaps problematized by her inability to see her face, Chloe can be considered a pleasure narrator.

4.2 Daphne

Daphne is a woman in her late twenties who originates from Hong Kong but has lived in the Netherlands her entire life. Thus far, she never felt sexually attracted to women and therefore she considers herself to be heterosexual. Daphne is in an open relationship with a man.

As a girl Daphne was already very interested in sexuality; at six she discovered it felt really pleasant to touch her crotch. At ten she finished reading every book about sexual education in the library. By then she was very interested in what it means to have periods and she knew that being touched a certain way by a boy could be really fun. Because of wanting to know more about sex, she secretly visited sex sites already at an early age.

¹¹⁹ *"Ik heb periode gehad waarbij ik jaren lang niet masturbeerde. Dat ik het vies vond om mijzelf daar beneden aan te raken. Het is immers ook het gebied waar je plast"* (Chloe, 5).

Within her stories Daphne focuses on her ‘perversions’¹²⁰. As a child she was obsessed by smooth things, such as velvet chairs, flawless pebble-stones in her pocket or silk scarves: *“they gave me a warm and pleasant feeling, like when you completely wrap yourself up in a duvet”*¹²¹ (Daphne, 4). Similarly, at 12 she was turned on by Catwoman in a Batman movie, who was wearing a shiny latex suit. ‘Perversions’ still play an important role in Daphne’s current sex life. Shiny and smooth objects still pleasure her; she continues loving latex but also enjoys other ‘perversions’ such as the schoolgirl-look. Some of her boyfriends enjoyed ‘sweet Asian girls’ and that was fine with Daphne.

4.2.1 Traditional Mother

Daphne knows what pleasures her and what turns her on. She developed this knowledge despite growing up in an environment where there was no room for sexuality. Daphne describes her mother as a traditional Chinese woman who rather wanted her daughter to start having relationships or boyfriends at a later age; in her view sex was meant for reproduction and not for pleasure. In addition, talking about sex was not accepted. When Daphne was no longer in touch with her mother, she started asking attention from boyfriends; since she was 15 she has always been in relationships.

In her stories it becomes apparent that Daphne grew up in an environment where sex was considered to serve no other goal than reproduction. In societal discourse female desire is often silenced or repressed in multiple ways, but in Daphne’s case the repression of her sexual development is very practical and clear as her mother restricts her sexuality. In a sense, Foucault’s (1998) repressive hypothesis is literally at work within their family. While Daphne’s mother is the personification of the restrictive power that represses Daphne’s sexuality, sexuality is a central aspect of Daphne’s life; in her life sexuality as a theme flourishes. As such, it can be argued that because of her mother’s restrictions, Daphne’s interest in sexuality increased, so she went to other places to gain knowledge regarding the subject. Despite having grown up in a restrictive family, Daphne has been able to develop her sexual subjectivity. Sex plays an important role within her life and she is well able to articulate what is pleasurable to her.

¹²⁰ ‘Perversions’ is a word that Daphne mentions multiple times within her stories with inverted commas. In exploring her stories I follow her usage of the word.

¹²¹ *“Ik kreeg er een warm en een fijn gevoel van, net als wanneer je jezelf helemaal in een dekbed inpakt”* (Daphne, 4).

4.2.2 Daily Life Experiments

Daphne continuously fantasises about sex; she fantasises about her boyfriend, whether or not in combination with porn she recently saw. She desires having sex, as it makes her experience pleasure. She enjoys making sex part of her everyday life: *“Boyfriend and I love perverse thoughts that we release in ‘normal daily life’”*¹²² (Daphne, 7). Overall, despite the repressive power embodied by her traditional mother, Daphne highlights how her sexual life focuses on new experiences and ‘perversions’:

*“On my last birthday, when all guest were either asleep or gone, I was touched very nicely by my boyfriend and a friend of his that I like as well. It was shadowy in the kitchen and it was the first time for all of us, which made it extra exciting. Moving to the bed was not an option because I had houseguests. Beforehand I had said that I wanted a threesome with them and they liked that too. It was at the same time intimate and natural”*¹²³ (Daphne, 8).

Sex is an important part of daily life for Daphne and her partner, with whom she experiments by ‘releasing perverse thoughts’. They have sex multiple times a week and often discuss the topic. The above quote shows that within these talks they also discuss desires or new possibilities that might be pleasurable, one of those involving a threesome with a friend. They are open to new experiences, such as being touched in the kitchen at the end of a party without the possibility of taking it further. The story involves not only a new experience for the three of them, but also the possibility of being caught by one of the houseguests. This social risk is compelling, as being caught would mean that Daphne is found with two men. It could be inferred Daphne feels very confident about her rights to sexual pleasure, as she is willing to take the risks involved in being caught with two men, despite coming from a family where all sex for pleasure is considered excessive and growing up in a society that teaches double standards concerning men and women’s sexuality.

¹²² *“Vriend en ik houden van perverse gedachten die we in een ‘dagelijkse normale leven’ hier en daar wat loslaten”* (Daphne, 7).

¹²³ *Op mijn laatste verjaardag, toen mijn gasten al sliepen of weg waren, werd ik heel fijn aangeraakt door mijn vriend en zijn vriend die ik ook leuk vind. Het was schimmig in de keuken en voor alle drie was het de eerste keer, wat het ook spannend maakte. Verdergaan in bed ging niet door omdat ik logés had. Van te voren had ik geuit dat ik een trio met ze wilde en dat leek ze ook wat. Het was intiem en vanzelfsprekend tegelijkertijd”*(Daphne, 8).

4.2.3 Body Language

Like most other women, Daphne does not make any references to her body within her stories. When asked to describe the role their bodies play in experiences with sexual desire and pleasure, most women in this study answer by discussing how their body feels during sex or what it looks like. For instance, Heather describes she is 'no fan' of her body, while Ruby discusses how her body feels and responds during sex and Saar describes having a positive body image due to growing up on naturist campsites.

Daphne, however, interprets the survey question differently and responds by stating: "*I do not really know how to answer this question. I try to create a body language when I feel like having sex and sometimes I dress like it*"¹²⁴ (Daphne, 9). Instead of discussing her body image or how her body feels during sexual experiences, she discusses attempting to adjust her body language to a situation and dressing in certain ways depending on the situation¹²⁵. She might be referring to something she said earlier; one of the 'perverse' things she enjoys is the schoolgirl-look. Some of her ex-partners enjoyed the 'cute Asian schoolgirl'-look. Daphne specifically states that 'this is fine' to her. Perhaps this statement implies Daphne *could* consider this problematic, but did not. Daphne coined the look as 'perversion'; this in combination with stating she considers it 'fine' that her ex-partners enjoyed seeing her that way gives rise to questions: What does this specific look entail? What aspects could be problematic?

The figure of the Asian schoolgirl is an important figure in the porn industry (Gossett and Byrne 2002). It is a girl wearing a short skirt and a white blouse. Her age is important; it being a schoolgirl implies a young age, which is connected to submissiveness, virginity and innocence. This innocence is amplified by the girl's racial background; "Although Asian women often have been stereotyped as sexually experienced whores, there are also contradictions, as seen in the persistence of the stereotype of Asian women as cute, docile, and doll-like" (Gossett and Byrne 2002, 703). All these characteristics together form the Orientalist image of the Asian schoolgirl.

Daphne thinks it is 'fine' that multiple partners have enjoyed seeing this figure in her. Also, playing this figure is one of her own perversions. Perhaps this is a form of strategic essentialism (Spivak 1988), which involves a minority group strategically using a certain characteristic in order to reach a certain goal. When for instance women or black people want to make a political statement as a group, it can be important to essentialise their identity in order to be one coherent whole. Emphasising their similarities instead of their differences for a short

¹²⁴ "*Ik weet het niet zo goed hoe ik deze vraag moet beantwoorden. Ik probeer wel een lichaamstaal te maken als ik zin heb en soms kleed ik me er ook wel naar*" (Daphne, 9).

¹²⁵ This answer does not allow for an understanding of Daphne's perception of the feelings of her body during sex or her body image, but it does point to the possibility of understanding the question differently, thereby highlighting the subjective interpretation each woman made of the survey questions.

time, it can be easier to achieve a common goal. In Daphne's case she chooses to emphasize her Asian heritage, for the short time of a sexual encounter, in order to achieve her goal; she 'essentializes' herself by playing a 'cute Asian schoolgirl' because this brings her the pleasure she aims for.

Overall, Daphne's stories are pleasure focused. Although having grown up in a repressive environment with no space for sexuality, she actively fought the norms she was taught by her mother. She developed a sexual subjectivity that involves knowing what she desires and what she considers pleasurable; it is clear that she feels entitled to sexual pleasure and safety, that she experiences herself as sexual being that makes active sexual choices, and that she has developed an identity as sexual being. Altogether, experiencing sexual desire and pleasure have become key-aspects of her life.

4.3 Jasmin

Like Daphne, Jasmin is another respondent who specifically discusses the disciplining power her parents had over her sexuality and how she had to fight the norms she was taught in order to develop her sexual subjectivity to its full extent. Jasmin is one of the women who are very articulate about their thoughts, wishes and desires. She describes herself as a white, Dutch, academically educated, able-bodied, pansexual, polyamorous cis-woman in her mid-twenties. Like in Alex's case, it becomes apparent from her self-description that Jasmin has profoundly examined her identity, including themes like gender and sexuality. She chooses terms to describe herself which are not commonly known and which were not included in the survey, such as her able-bodiedness, the type of relationships she has (polyamorous), her gender (cisgendered woman) and her sexual orientation (pansexual).

4.3.1 Disciplining Power

Jasmin has been interested in sexuality and bodies from an early age. In kindergarten Jasmin and her classmates were wondering what the difference was between having sex and fucking. They thought having sex meant rubbing the front of their bodies against each other, while fucking involved rubbing their backs. Interestingly, Jasmin knew sex was somehow problematic: *"I knew it was wrong and dirty, but simultaneously I considered it extremely interesting. On my own I thought about it a lot"*¹²⁶ (Jasmin, 3). Jasmin experienced a continuous combination of interest

¹²⁶ *"Ik wist dat het fout en vies was, maar vond het tegelijkertijd bovenmatig interessant en dacht er in mijn eentje, veel over na"* (Jasmin, 3).

and curiosity with feelings of wrongness, guilt and shame. Asking questions about sex in kindergarten already left her with *“a tingling feeling in my abdomen and also in my stomach; it was a combination of really wanting something, being curious, and knowing you are doing something naughty that is really not allowed”*¹²⁷ (Jasmin, 4). This combination of curiosity, guilt and shame have persisted for a long time. In her experiences with men, Jasmin felt like she was doing something wrong, despite the fact that she really desired to have these experiences. As she describes: *“The role of my parents as disciplining power over my sexuality did not help; the feeling of simultaneously desiring and self-censuring haunted me until recently”*¹²⁸ (Jasmin, 5). In Daphne’s case I connected the situation between her and her mother to Foucault’s (1998) repressive hypothesis; Daphne’s stories indicate that the repressive hypothesis is actively at work within her family. In Jasmin’s stories the connection is even clearer, because Jasmin specifically describes her parents as ‘disciplining power’. Like in Daphne’s case, her parents can be considered the personification of the restrictive power as described by Foucault.

As a result, Jasmin’s experiences of sexuality have for a long time been a difficult combination of curiosity and shame. By describing her parents as ‘disciplining power’, Jasmin is implying that they played an important role in teaching her sex is bad and shameful. However, later in life Jasmin was able to question and overcome the norms she was taught during childhood.

4.3.2 Source of Energy

When Jasmin and her first love broke up, she was able to overcome feeling ashamed for what she enjoys. Topics related to sexuality increasingly play an important role in her life. Jasmin considers sexual desire as a primary source of energy and power in her life and everything she does happens from a desire for connection, intimacy and sexuality:

*“It is my primary source of energy. Every movement I make, every action I undertake, originates from a feeling of sensuality and sexuality. Practically this means that I think a lot about sex, how different sexual situations can be created, what could happen in those situations and how much fun that could be”*¹²⁹ (Jasmin, 7).

¹²⁷ *“een tintelend gevoel in m’n onderbuik en ook in mijn maag; het was een combinatie van heel graag iets willen, nieuwsgierig zijn, en weten dat je iets stouts doet wat echt niet mag”* (Jasmin, 4).

¹²⁸ *“De rol van mijn ouders als disciplinerende macht over mijn seksualiteit hielp niet; het gevoel van zowel het willen als het zelf-censureren heeft me tot recentelijk achtervolgd”* (Jasmin, 5).

¹²⁹ *“Het is mijn primaire levensenergie. Elke beweging die ik maak, elke actie die ik onderneem, komt voort uit een gevoel van sensualiteit en seksualiteit. Praktisch betekent dit dat ik veel nadenk over seks, hoe je verschillende situaties kan creëren, wat je in die situaties zou kunnen doen en hoe leuk dat zou zijn”* (Jasmin, 7).

In this quote the importance of sexuality and sensuality is discussed. Having intimate experiences with others is an essential part of Jasmin's life, therefore 'every movement' and 'every action' emerges out of Jasmin as sexual being; she describes her sexual self is an essential part of who she is. Within this sexual self, desire is of particular importance; she spends the larger part of her days desiring. *"With everyone I meet I feel a certain level of sexual attraction (although sometimes very small), which makes me desire closeness, sexuality and intimacy"*¹³⁰ (Jasmin, 6). Sexual desire is very important to Jasmin in her daily life and sex life.

Jasmin describes having a male and a female partner. She regularly has sex with them and often fantasises about having sex with them. In her sexual relationship with her male partner, Jasmin is submissive to him and has to follow his orders. Jasmin often desires to be in such situations; she desires being denied things because such situations really turn her on:

*"I was naked and tied up by my male partner. Although we had been in touch for only a short period of time, we knew we had a deep connection. I was sitting on the ground and the ropes were cutting my skin. It was a wonderful feeling. I depended on him completely, I could not move, but simultaneously I wanted to do everything for him, whatever he would want. I felt the urge to pee. Therefore I asked him, "Can I go to the toilet?", even though in normal settings I would never ask anyone permission to do so. He looked at me, gave a sweet smile and said "No". I was happy and scared at the same time. It was amazing"*¹³¹ (Jasmin, 8).

In this quote Jasmin describes one of her pleasures to be submissive to her male partner. The situation is based on trust; because of their 'deep connection' Jasmin is able to completely depend on his wishes, not being able to move or make decisions herself. She experiences pleasure in this vulnerability, in being denied what she wants. In this moment, the sexual experience depends on her partner's actions.

The above quote is an example of a sexual and sensual experience to Jasmin. In these experiences her body plays an important role; when touched sexually this creates deep feelings in Jasmin's body. She explains that when fantasising or physically connecting to people this creates a feeling in the spot that is called the second chakra¹³². On top of that, a feeling is caused

¹³⁰ *"Bij iedereen die ik tegenkom voel ik een mate van seksuele aantrekkingskracht (hoe klein soms ook), die maakt dat ik altijd verlang naar nabijheid en seksualiteit en intimiteit"* (Jasmin, 6).

¹³¹ *"Ik was naakt en vastgebonden door mijn mannelijke partner. We waren nog maar kort met elkaar in contact, maar hadden snel door dat we een diepe connectie hadden. Ik zat op de grond en de touwen sneden in m'n huid. Het was een heerlijk gevoel. Ik was compleet afhankelijk van hem, ik kon niet bewegen, maar wilde tegelijkertijd alles voor hem doen, wat hij maar zou willen. Ik voelde de aandrang om te plassen. Daarom vroeg ik hem: "Mag ik naar de wc?", terwijl ik, in een normale setting, niemand waar dan ook toestemming voor zou vragen. Hij keek me aan, glimlachte lief, en zei: "Nee." Ik was blij en bang tegelijkertijd. Het was fantastisch"* (Jasmin, 8).

¹³² The second chakra is located at the lower abdomen, just below the navel (Carrellas 2007).

where her heart is located or just below the chest. Also when Jasmin is touched, her body responds with these intense feelings. Experiencing physical contact with people is very important to Jasmin: *“My body wants real attention or no attention at all. No little bits”*¹³³ (Jasmin, 9). Although she enjoys being touched intentionally, she is *“extremely annoyed when someone is just petting a little”*¹³⁴ (Jasmin, 9).

Once again it becomes apparent how well Jasmin knows what she wants. Although she had trouble allowing herself to be sexual as a child because of feeling shameful and naughty, she has been able to overcome these feelings of shame. Jasmin has been able to develop her sexual subjectivity in such a way that understanding herself as sexual being is at the heart of how she understands herself. Sexuality and sensuality have become the core of her being and as such inform her every movement.

4.4 Hazel

The last woman whose stories are explored is Hazel. Like Jasmin, Hazel describes how she experienced sexuality as something in which taboo and curiosity intertwined. Hazel is a bisexual woman whose relationships and sexual contacts are mainly with men. She is a Dutch woman, who now lived and worked abroad for five years, and who recently started a new relationship. She has been interested in sexuality ever since she was young: *“I was not the girl who masturbated publicly, but I did consider it interesting what was beneath someone’s clothes”*¹³⁵ (Hazel, 2)¹³⁶. She liked staying over at a friend’s place, because her friend had a book about sex with pictures, *“that was awesome”*¹³⁷ (Hazel, 3). With her friends she imitated what they saw in the book, such as certain positions or rubbing their bodies against each other. Hazel adds that these experiences were very innocent; they kept their clothes on and were laughing a lot.

Today, sex still plays a very important role in Hazel’s life. Although there are periods in which she does not daily desire sex, usually she does. When she does, she either has sex with her partner or masturbates when she is home alone. Sex is not only important to her because it is pleasurable, but also because it is a way to de-stress from work or sports. It is a good way to indulge each other and to sleep well afterwards.

¹³³ *“Mijn lichaam wil echte aandacht of niks. Geen kleine beetjes”* (Jasmin, 9).

¹³⁴ *“[Ik kan me er] kapot aan ergeren wanneer iemand me maar een beetje ligt te aaien”* (Jasmin, 9).

¹³⁵ *“Ik was niet een meisje dat publiekelijk ging masturberen, maar vond het wel interessant om te weten wat er onder iemands kleren zat”* (Hazel, 2).

¹³⁶ She implies here that others did so, without detailing what this would entail. This will be elaborated upon later.

¹³⁷ *“dat was te gek”* (Hazel, 3).

4.4.1 Secret Sexuality

By the time Hazel was 11 or 12 she knew quite well what sex was. As she got her own television at 15, she 'secretly' watched exploratory programs about sex, thereby learning a lot about themes such as oral sex, fantasies and different interests people can have. All these early experiences with sexuality were informed by a pure interest. Such moments happened in secret, making it extra interesting. Hazel knew that what she did was 'taboo' and 'strange'; she explains that *"of course you don't discuss it in daytime as a young kid"*¹³⁸ (Hazel, 4).

Hazel experienced secrecy; social norms regarding sexuality informed a taboo on the subject. Like Daphne, Hazel describes her mother's role as disciplining power, without specifically mentioning this term. Hazel experienced her first orgasm when she bought a sex toy and started experimenting after she moved out at 18; before that she did not dare to do so, because her mother could find the toy. In Hazel's experience her mother restricted the development of her sexual subjectivity; she guarded social norms regarding sexuality, thereby leaving Hazel unable to experiment.

Nevertheless, Hazel describes herself as always having been very sexual. Regardless of gender Hazel considers bodies very interesting; they turn her on. Ever since she left her mother's home she has been open to all new experiences and tried many new things in different relationships. She enjoys having sex and describes being well able to adjust to a partner. Hazel describes different reasons for the pleasure she experiences:

*"Sometimes you just want to be fucked hard and sometimes you want to take time, be intimate, go on for a long time, et cetera. For me it depends on my partner. With my ex it became routine, but it was also a way of finding each other again. In my new relationship I actually have everything I ever wanted: a good balance between hard and soft, openness, passion and the willingness to take time for each other"*¹³⁹ (Hazel, 6).

Hazel describes that she enjoys the possibility of having sex in different ways depending on her mood; sometimes she enjoys 'hard' sex while other times she rather has 'soft' and 'intimate' sex. She also describes how these possibilities depend on a partner; in her current partner she finds 'everything she ever wanted'. Together they are well able to adjust to each other's needs, which can be different each time. As such she appears to have been well able to develop her sexual subjectivity, as put forward by Tolman (2005). She experiences the sexual safety needed for

¹³⁸ *"Omdat je er overdag natuurlijk als jong kind niet over praat"* (Hazel, 4).

¹³⁹ *"Ik geniet enorm van seks, zelfs als ik geen orgasme heb. Voor mij is het verschillend waarom; soms wil je gewoon even keihard genomen worden, en soms wil je de tijd voor elkaar nemen, intiem zijn, lang doorgaan, etc. Het ligt bij mij aan mijn partner. Met mijn ex werd het een beetje routine, maar ook een manier om elkaar weer te vinden in de relatie. Maar nu met mijn nieuwe relatie is het eigenlijk wat ik altijd al wilde: een goede balans tussen hard en zacht, openheid, passie en willingness om de tijd voor elkaar te nemen"* (Hazel, 6).

experiencing and feeling entitled to pleasure and knowing what it is she desires in specific situations.

4.4.2 Women's Orgasm

Hazel immensely enjoys sex, even when she does not experience an orgasm. Orgasms play a different role in the different women's stories. Saar describes needing to fantasise in order to reach an orgasm and feeling guilty about this towards her partner. Similarly, Heather needs to fantasise in order to reach an orgasm, but she considers the reading and fantasising that are involved as more sensual and sexual than the chasing of an orgasm itself. Ruby gained a lot of faith in her body due to the vaginal and multiple orgasms she experienced. Her body is increasingly becoming her buddy. Both Hazel and Heather describe that reaching an orgasm is not the most important part of sex, either solo or with a partner.

Research on orgasms in heterosexual relationships shows that men more consistently experience orgasms than women during sex with a man, which is for instance caused by inadequate sexual education that does not specify the importance of clitoral stimulation for women (Salisbury and Fisher 2014). In combination with limited skills in sexual communication, this results in men experiencing orgasms more consistently than women. Interestingly, women who are more likely to experience orgasm during sex, are also more likely to consider having an orgasm important.

When women do not experience orgasms, the biggest concern for both men and women is that this might have negative consequences for a man's ego (Salisbury and Fisher 2014). This explains Saar's guilt, but also Ruby's increasing faith in herself and Hazel's statement that having an orgasm is not a necessary component of having sex. Also, it shows the importance of exploring the role of orgasm in women's stories concerning sexuality. Different norms for men and women influence their perception of, and ability to, orgasm. Those norms are informed by the double standard; sexual pleasure and experiencing orgasms is more important for men, as women have to experience this pleasure in order to keep men's ego intact.

Although it is not necessary to have an orgasm, Hazel does know what can always bring to orgasm:

"I love it when someone talks to me when I almost come. Somehow this always brings me to orgasm. When it is hard, it drives me completely crazy when my hair is pulled and I hear "cum for me baby", or something like that. When it is soft, it is great when my neck and ears

*are kissed and simultaneously things are whispered. This creates such intense feelings inside me that I always come. It is something that I already like for years*¹⁴⁰ (Hazel, 8).

Being talked to during sex is pleasurable to Hazel and allows her to experience an orgasm. This desire is applicable both when having soft and hard sex, as long as the way of talking is adjusted to the situation. Interestingly, although she just mentioned that reaching an orgasm is not essential, she elaborates on exactly this experience when asked to describe a specific experience of sexual desire, pleasure or fantasy.

In agreement with general ideas regarding women's orgasm as proposed by Salisbury and Fisher (2014), Hazel states that she enjoys sex even when not reaching an orgasm. However, it can be argued that this statement is downplayed by the stories that followed, in which orgasm is a central topic. Perhaps it can be inferred that Hazel is in speech conforming to the norms regarding women's sexuality, while in actions and experiences she is not.

Hazel mentions orgasms again when asked to describe the role her body plays in her sexual experiences. As previously discussed, Ruby describes that when she is happier, she desires sex more and she is 'hornier'. Hazel describes a similar feeling but from the opposite point of view; when she feels less sexy she experiences more difficulties 'getting in the mood' and her partner has to make more effort to seduce her. Apart from that, she says, she knows her body very well:

*"I know in which positions I can come, I know how everything works, I knows almost all special places that can make me crazy; these are things I enjoy discovering with a partner. Also I know how to use my body in order to turn my partner on"*¹⁴¹ (Hazel, 9).

Hazel is well able to describe what turns her on, what she desires and what brings her pleasure. She gained this self-knowledge after she left her mother's home, when she was able to experiment with her sexuality. Ultimately, she is very interested in sexuality and attempts to be open about it to herself, her partner and others.

¹⁴⁰ *"Ik vind het heerlijk als iemand tegen me praat op het moment dat ik bijna kom. Dat brengt me op de een of andere manier altijd tot een orgasme. Als het hard is, dan kan het me helemaal gek maken om aan mijn haar getrokken te worden en dan te horen "cum for me baby", zoiets. Als het zacht is, vind ik het geweldig om in mijn hals en oren gekust te worden en dat er dan dingen gefluisterd worden. Dit is zo'n intens gevoel van binnen dat ik er altijd van klaarkom. En het is iets wat ik al jaren fijn vind"* (Hazel, 8).

¹⁴¹ *"Ik weet in welke posities ik goed klaar kan komen, ik weet hoe alles werkt, ik weet bijna al mijn speciale plekjes die me gek maken; dat zijn de dingen die leuk zijn om samen met iemand te leren kennen. En ik weet hoe ik mijn lichaam kan gebruiken om mijn partner op te winden"* (Hazel, 9).

4.4.3 Positive Teaching

Hazel actively attempts to fight against the taboo on sexuality and for a positive understanding of sexuality. Being a teacher, she attempts to pass this understanding of sexuality on to her pupils. Hazel teaches children who are 5 to 6 years old; in class she tries to always give positive reactions when sexuality is a topic in class. For instance, she describes discussing homo- and heterosexuality and she does not condemn it when pupils engage in sexual actions, of which kissing is just one example:

“Some time ago there was a girl who wanted to start masturbating while I was reading them a story. Instead of causing her shame I took her apart and said “listen, there is a place and time for everything and this is not the right place, ok?”; she understood this right away. Some people make a problem of such things but I believe it is important to learn how to deal with sexuality, fantasies and sexual orientation at a young age. You do not want to stop a child in its development in any way”¹⁴² (Hazel, 10).

Earlier, Hazel described she was not the kind of girl who masturbated publicly, without elaborating what that means to her. This quote is about one of her students that did masturbate publicly, although again Hazel does not describe what this entails. Nevertheless, the story is interesting because of Hazel’s conviction that sexuality should not be considered taboo. In her own stories it becomes apparent that she developed her sexual subjectivity by experimenting, and in this story about teaching it becomes apparent that she is convinced to teach this to her pupils. As such, the stories Hazel told by responding to the survey were different from the stories by others; not only can she be considered a pleasure narrator, she also actively supports the development of a healthy sexual subjectivity in her pupils.

4.5 Concluding Remarks

Similar to the previous chapters, exploring the stories of the women in this study also caused some questions. For instance, in Daphne’s stories there is a specific moment that highlights how every woman interprets the survey questions differently, as her understanding of the question concerning the role of the body was different from other respondents’ interpretations. Perhaps this is caused by Daphne having a different ethnic background than the other women in this

¹⁴² *“Laatst was een meisje redelijk op weg om te masturberen tijdens voorlezen, en in plaats van dan te laten schamen neem ik haar apart en zeg ik “luister, er is een tijd en plek voor alles en nu is even niet de juiste plek, oké?” en dat begrijpt ze dan meteen. Sommige mensen doen erg moeilijk over dit soort dingen maar in mijn ogen is het belangrijk dat je als jong kind al leert om met seksualiteit, fantasieën, en geaardheid om te leren gaan. Je wilt een kind niet tegenhouden in hun ontwikkeling, op welke manier dan ook” (Hazel, 10).*

study. Perhaps the differences in social norms guiding Asian-looking and Dutch-looking women's body image and feelings, caused her to interpret the question differently. As discussed above, her Asian heritage caused some boyfriends to have specific expectations of Daphne, which she did not mind fulfilling. Her ethnic background might result in Daphne encountering different norms concerning her body's looks and feelings. This highlights that women from different social backgrounds are not confronted with the same norms. How this influences women's development of their sexual subjectivity is to be investigated by an intersectional study concerning women's sexuality.

As previously discussed, the women whose stories were discussed in this chapter have encountered repressive messages concerning their sexuality, but have nevertheless developed a healthy sexual subjectivity. More than the women in the previous chapter, they have become aware of norms somewhere in the past, which made them able to question those norms and to focus on their own sexual desire and pleasure.

Conclusion

In my study I have gathered and explored young Dutch women's stories on sexual desires and pleasures. The stories are of a very diverse nature; although the social background of the group of respondents is relatively similar, their stories differ greatly. Analysing the stories took place by following the main research question: *How do young Dutch women narrate their sexual desires and pleasures in a discursive reality that silences such experiences?*

My study is based on several assumptions, first of which is that it is important to develop a healthy sexual subjectivity, as this development is related to the development of, among other things, identity, autonomy, subjectivity and assertiveness (Vanwesenbeeck 2011). In order to develop a healthy sexual subjectivity, women have to defy the repressive social norms regarding women's sexuality. This means that the double standard concerning women's sexuality that prevails in society, negatively influences women's ability to experience themselves as sexual being, to feel entitled to pleasure and safety, to make active sexual choices, and to have an identity as a sexual being (Tolman 2005). The stories women narrated indeed indicated that these assumptions are correct; although women told stories of sexual desire and pleasure, repressive norms were presented in the women's stories both overtly and covertly. This influenced the stories women told, which were very diverse and included women's desires, pleasures and fantasies: some women narrated having trouble experiencing desire while others were very pleasure focused, some explored repressive norms influencing them while others appeared unaware of those. Often, a woman was able to identify and question some norms, while not even recognizing others. Overall, the extent to which women were able to develop a healthy sexual subjectivity can be seen as related to their ability to recognize, question and defy

norms.

The women in this study were categorized in three groups. As previously discussed, the first group encompasses women who experience the most trouble; for them experiencing pleasure is difficult. The women in the second group are those who question some norms but not others, but who nevertheless report experiencing more sexual desire and pleasure than the first group. The third group of women can be defined as pleasure narrators; although having encountered repressive norms throughout their lives, they mostly focus on pleasure instead.

This categorisation was inspired by Tompson's (1990) categorization of girls in two groups; some girls were pleasure narrators and to others sexual experiences 'just happened'. I argue it is important to move beyond this binary thinking. In order to do so, I have chosen to add a third category of women who can be positioned in-between Thompson's categories. However, merely adding a category is not enough to overcome this binary thinking. Instead of considering each category as separate entity with clear borders, the thin lines separating the categories should be considered as fluid and blurred. They should be understood as parts of a spectrum, on which each woman has her own location. Theoretically, the left-side of this spectrum involves women who have not been able to develop a sexual subjectivity at all, while the right side of the spectrum involves women who have completed the development their sexual subjectivity in a healthy way. In practice, this left- and right-end of the spectrum are merely theoretical positions where people cannot be located, as each person will always have always developed a sexual subjectivity to some extent and no one has ever completed the development of their sexual subjectivity. The development can be envisioned as an ongoing and never ending process; even being a pleasure narrator with a healthy sexual subjectivity does not imply that the process of development is completed and finalised. Each person continues to learn, change and evolve, and the route that is taken does not have a clear start, line of progress and end. Everyone's route is different from others' and is being influenced by their bodies, the people they meet, their experiences and the messages they receive from society.

Just as no one can have a sexual subjectivity that is one hundred percent evolved, no one starts from zero. As sexuality is part of our discursive reality, no one can encounter sexuality from a completely neutral starting point; there is always some basis to start from. In our current discursive reality women's starting point is more problematic than men's as a result of the prevailing double standard concerning sexuality, consequentially the development of women's sexual subjectivity takes more effort than men's. Each woman engages with those hindrances her own way, on her own pace.

The spot on the spectrum where a person can be positioned depends on multiple factors. Repressive social norms as informed by the double standard are an important factor, because they are part of a person's discursive reality. The norms also influence the people in a person's

environment and as such they exceed categories like family, friends and peers, but also more general categories such as the media.

My study lays the groundwork for a better understanding of women's sexual desire and pleasure in future research. What I added to the scholarship on women's sexuality is an exploration of young Dutch women's stories in their own words; I asked women to share personal stories which are normally silenced and as such gave them the freedom to share stories about sexual desires and pleasures. Also, this study allows other women access to those stories, thereby providing them a yardstick. By exploring the stories, it became apparent that the discursive reality repressing women's sexuality has detrimental effects on the development of their sexual subjectivity, and that once women are aware of these norms and are able to question them, the possibility of developing a healthy sexual subjectivity is improved. Overall, my main conclusion is that there is a need for a sharing of stories, the creation of awareness, the ability to question, and the development of a sexual subjectivity.

Developing a healthy sexual subjectivity is important, because it provides a crucial way of understanding and knowing oneself, on top of which it is related to one's general health. Unfortunately this development is burdened by double standards and repressive norms. Women should for instance be sexy without desiring sex; in essence it is not acceptable for them to be sexual beings that have sexual desires and can experience sexual pleasure. In order to overcome those and other norms, I propose there is a need for two things. First, the norms themselves are to be fought and a more positive understanding of women's sexuality should be constructed. Although the repressive aspects of sex are not taboo (*potestas*), the enabling aspects (*potentia*) are. In order to break this taboo, there is a need for pleasure-focused sex-education which creates awareness of current societal norms, which allows them to question those, and which provides girls with the tools to develop a healthy sexual subjectivity. On top of that there is a need for more diversity in portrayals of sex, bodies and beauty in media. In order to break prevailing norms, a different imagery is needed that allows girls and women with different bodies, desires and pleasures to identify with this imagery.

Most importantly this study calls for further research. This research should be repeated with a larger data set and a focus on intersectionality; stories of women from a multiplicity of social backgrounds should be explored. Daphne is the only woman who describes not being a white Dutch woman in this study. Her stories point at one of the shortcomings of this study, as for instance the 'Asian schoolgirl figure' shows the need of a culture specific analysis. Future research should be more intersectional and focus on women from different ages, ethnicities and classes, but should also include women who less easily discuss sexuality and women who do not have access to Facebook or internet. Also, future research must focus on what allows women to question norms, and for instance ask one of the following questions: How do women become

aware of norms? Why do they become aware of some norms but not of others? What factors are involved here? How can we raise awareness of norms and promote the questioning of those norms? In what way does sharing stories help in this process? What does it mean to share a story?

When Nancy Friday published *My Secret Garden* in 1973 she argued women were in need of a yardstick; knowing the sexual fantasies of others would help them understand and construct their own fantasies. By conducting this research and discussing it with others, I learned we are still in need of such a yardstick. I learned that hearing how others masturbate, what they fantasise about, how they experience orgasms, and what brings them pleasure is extremely important. The sharing of real stories allows for awareness of norms, they enable people to question or rethink their habits, to develop and reinvent their sexual lives, and to consider new possibilities. In the end, openness about sex does not only allow for an incredible lot of desire and pleasure, but also of happiness and fun.

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Appendix 1

Survey

By filling in this survey you give permission to use the data for the purpose of this research and possibly for further publications. Your answers will be processed anonymously and confidentially.

1. Describe yourself briefly. You can think about gender (sex), age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, physical restraints/possibilities, relation status, children, occupation, education, hair colour, favourite food, or other things that are important to you.

Omschrijf kort wie je bent. Hierbij kan je denken aan je gender (geslacht), leeftijd, seksuele geaardheid, etniciteit, lichamelijke beperkingen/mogelijkheden, relatie status, kinderen, beroep, opleidingsniveau, haarkleur, lievelingseten, of andere punten die belangrijk zijn voor jou.

2. At what age did sexuality start to play a role in your life?

Op welke leeftijd ging je je bezighouden met seksualiteit?

3. What was your first experience with sexuality? Not only think about the first time you kissed or had sex, but also think about (sex related) feelings you had as a child playing with toys or watching a tv-program.

Wat was je eerste ervaring met seksualiteit? Denk hierbij niet alleen aan de eerste keer dat je zoende of seks had, maar ook aan (seksueel gerelateerde) gevoelens die je als kind had tijdens het spelen met speelgoed of het kijken van een tv-programma.

4. What caused the experience you just described? What happened in your body?

Wat was de oorzaak van de ervaring die je net beschreven hebt? Wat gebeurde er in je lichaam?

5. How have your experiences with sexuality changed as you grew older?

Hoe zijn je ervaringen met seksualiteit veranderd naarmate je ouder bent geworden?

Sexuality is not only about sex, but involves many different aspects. Examples of those are the erotic, pleasure, desire, fantasies, norms and values, intimacy, reproduction, roles and relationships. Experiences and feelings can be positive but also negative. From this point on the emphasis is on sexual desire, pleasure (in English 'pleasure') and fantasies.

Seksualiteit bestaat niet alleen uit seks, maar uit veel verschillende aspecten. Voorbeelden hiervan zijn erotiek, genot, verlangen, fantasieën, normen en waarden, intimiteit, reproductie, rollen en

relaties. Ervaringen en gevoelens kunnen positief maar ook negatief zijn. In de rest van de vragenlijst ligt de nadruk op de seksueel verlangen, genot (in het Engels 'pleasure') en fantasieën.

6. In what way do sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy play a role in your sexuality? You can wonder whether sex is something you desire to have, whether you feel pleasure when having sex, or whether you fantasise about/during sex.

Op welke manier spelen seksueel verlangen, genot en fantasieën voor jou een rol in seksualiteit? Hierbij kan je je bijvoorbeeld afvragen of seks iets is waar je naar verlangt en/of van geniet, en of je fantaseert over/tijdens seks.

7. What role do sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy (or sexuality in general) play in your daily life?

Welke rol spelen seksueel verlangen, genot en fantasieën (of seksualiteit in het algemeen) in je dagelijks leven?

8. Describe one or more specific experience(s) with sexual desire, pleasure and/or fantasy. You can think about a very pleasurable moment you experienced the last time you had sex, or a fantasy that keeps returning, or that one time you felt an enormous desire to be touched a certain way. The point is to elaborate on a specific moment.

Beschrijf één of meerdere specifieke ervaring(en) met seksueel verlangen, genot en/of fantasieën. Hierbij kan je bijvoorbeeld denken aan een moment waarvan je erg genoot tijdens de laatste keer dat je seks had, of aan een fantasie die steeds terugkeert, of aan die keer dat je intens verlangde om op een bepaalde manier aangeraakt te worden. Het gaat er hierbij vooral om dat je iets dieper ingaat op een specifiek moment.

9. Describe to what extent your body plays a role in your experiences with sexual desire, pleasure and/or fantasies.

Beschrijf in hoeverre je lichaam een rol speelt in je ervaringen met seksueel verlangen, genot en/of fantasieën.

10. What does it feel like to answer these questions and thereby write down your stories?

Hoe voelt het om deze vragen te beantwoorden, en je daarmee je verhalen op te schrijven?

11. Has the writing down changed anything in your perception of sexuality?

Heeft het opschrijven van je verhalen veranderd hoe je tegen je seksualiteit aankijkt?

12. Is there anything else you want to share?

Is er iets dat je nog wilt delen/kwijt wilt?

13. If you want to know the results of this study, you can fill in your email address here.

Wil je de uitkomsten van de studie weten en het verslag toegezonden krijgen? Vul dan hier je email adres in.

Thank you for responding to the survey! In case you think of any questions later or you want to add something, you can always send me an email (barbaraoud@gmail.com).

Dankjewel voor het invullen van de vragenlijst! Mocht je later nog vragen hebben of iets willen toevoegen, dan mag je me altijd een mailtje sturen (barbaraoud@gmail.com).

Appendix 2

Survey Responses Daphne

Below are the survey questions and Daphne's responses to them. They are featured here in order to provide an example of the answers that were given to the questions and of the way in which people responded to the survey. The first answer is not included in pursuance of Daphne's anonymity. The answers in English¹⁴³ are followed by the original answers in Dutch.

- 1.
2. I think about 9-10 years old? At the youth department of the library I read almost all books about sexual education, at an early age I engaged with having my period (I was 13-years-old when I had my period for the first time). I knew that when you are touched by a boy in a certain way, this can be very nice. I wanted to know what sex was at an early age and I secretly visited sex-sites.

Ik denk een jaar of 9-10? Ik heb bij de jeugdafdeling van de bibliotheek bijna alle boeken gelezen over seksuele voorlichting, hield me al vroeg bezig over ongesteld zijn (ik was 13 toen ik voor het eerst ongesteld werd). Ik wist dat als je op een bepaalde manier door een leuke jongen aangeraakt wordt, het heel leuk kan zijn. Ik wilde al vroeg weten hoe seks was en ik bezocht stiekem al jong sekssites op.

3. I was 12 when I watched a Batman movie and I was turned on by Catwoman, who wore a shiny latex-suit. I was about 6-years-old when I figured out that when you touch your crotch, it feels pleasant.

Ik was 12 toen ik naar een Batman film keek en ik werd opgewonden van Catwoman die een glimmende latex-pak aanhad. Ik was een jaartje of zes toen ik achterkwam dat als je aan je kruis zit, een prettig gevoel geeft.

4. I cannot really describe the cause, but when I was little I had an obsession with smooth things: velvet chairs, flawless pebble-stones that I had in my pocket, silk scarves, et cetera. They gave me a warm and pleasant feeling, like when you completely wrap yourself up in a duvet.

Ik kan de oorzaak niet goed omschrijven, maar ik had toen ik klein was een obsessie met gladde dingen: fluwelen stoelen, gave kiezelstenen die ik in mijn broekzak stak, zijden sjaaltjes, enzovoorts. Ik kreeg er een warm en een fijn gevoel van, net als wanneer je jezelf helemaal in een dekbed inpakt.

¹⁴³ My translation.

5. My mother is a traditional Chinese woman that preferred to see her daughter to start late with boyfriends/relationships. Talking about sex was out of the question, sex was not meant for pleasure. When I wasn't in touch with her anyone, I no longer received the essential attention and sought that from boyfriends. Since I was 15 I always had boyfriends, I do not even know what it is to be single for a longer period of time. Today I love sex a lot and I think I know what I find pleasurable. I love latex and other 'perverse' things like the schoolgirl-look. Some boyfriends liked the 'sweet Asian girls' and I thought that was fine.

Mijn moeder is een traditionele Chinese vrouw die het liefst zag dat haar dochter laat begint met vriendjes/relaties. Praten over seks met ouders is uit den boze, seks was niet bedoeld voor plezier. Toen ik geen contact meer kreeg met haar, kreeg ik geen essentiële aandacht meer en die zocht ik bij vriendjes. Ik heb vanaf mijn 15e voortdurend vriendjes gehad, ik weet niet hoe het is om lang single te zijn. Ik houd nu heel veel van seks en ik denk dat ik ook weet wat ik lekker vind. Ik houd van latex en van 'perverse' dingen zoals de schoolmeisjes-look. Sommige vriendjes hadden een oog voor 'schattige Aziatische meisjes' en ik vond het prima.

6. I continuously fantasise during sex, about my boyfriend, whether or not in combination with porn I have seen recently. I feel pleasure having sex and I also desire it.

Ik fantaseer voortdurend over seks, over mijn vriend, al dan niet in combinatie met porno die ik recentelijk heb gezien. Ik geniet van seks en ik verlang er ook naar.

7. I think quite a big role. Boyfriend and I love perverse thoughts that we release in 'daily normal life'. We have sex multiple times a week and we talk about it a lot.

Ik denk een best wel grote rol. Vriend en ik houden van perverse gedachten die we in een 'dagelijkse normale leven' hier en daar wat loslaten. We hebben meerdere keren per week seks en we praten er erg veel over.

8. On my last birthday, when all guest were either asleep or gone, I was touched very nicely by my boyfriend and a friend of him that I like as well. It was shadowy in the kitchen and it was the first time for all of us, which made it extra exciting. Moving to the bed was not an option because I had houseguests. Beforehand I had said that I wanted a threesome with them and they liked that too. It was at the same time intimate and natural.

Op mijn laatste verjaardag, toen mijn gasten al sliepen of weg waren, werd ik heel fijn aangeraakt door mijn vriend en zijn vriend die ik ook leuk vind. Het was schimmig in de keuken en voor alle drie was het de eerste keer, wat het ook spannend maakte. Verdergaan in bed ging niet door omdat ik logés had. Van te voren had ik geuit dat ik een trio met ze wilde en dat leek ze ook wat. Het was intiem en vanzelfsprekend tegelijkertijd.

9. I do not really know how to answer this question. I try to create a body language when I feel like having sex and sometimes I dress like it.

Ik weet het niet zo goed hoe ik deze vraag moet beantwoorden. Ik probeer wel een lichaamstaal te maken als ik zin heb en soms kleed ik me ook wel naar.

10. I am not ashamed of it, but it matters that I tell this anonymous (although I can also talk about sex to friends). My body tickles but I feel like I have to stop it.

Ik schaam me er niet voor, maar het scheelt dat ik deze anoniem vertel (hoewel ik met vrienden ook over seks kan praten). Mijn lichaam kriebelt maar ik voel ook alsof ik het moet tegenhouden.

11. No.

Nee.

12. No. Good luck with your research!

Nee. Veel succes met je onderzoek!