

**SUBJECT POSITIONS IN WOMEN'S
TALK ABOUT FEMALE GENITALS**

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Master of Arts Degree
in the Department of Psychology
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By

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ABSTRACT

A critical feminist discursive approach was used to explore how and to what ends women organized their talk about female genitals. Exploration and interpretation of how the eight women in this research used talk to orient their constructed positions for female genitals, within the dyad conversational sessions, was informed by the analytic concepts of interpretative repertoires, subject positioning and ideological dilemmas. Findings indicated that these women repeatedly drew on socially available information (e.g., fictional and non-fictional literature, media, family and friend, empirical research) regarding female genitals during their dyad discussions. Shared components in the women's accounts were organized into two opposing interpretative repertoires consistent with those identified in a selection of reviewed textual resources: powerful female genital repertoire and powerless female genital repertoire. The participants drew on both these repertoires when arguing and defending multiple, and often contradictory, subject positions on this topic. Although the women discursively demonstrated a strong pull toward a position that aligned with the powerful repertoire, their powerful subject positions were tenuous. This tenuousness may have been due to the sensitive nature of this topic, the rhetorical demands of the research conversations, and/or the untenability of an extremist position in either of the powerful or powerless female genital repertoires. Further, these women did not construct any new information in their talk regarding female genitals, thus suggesting that the female genital repertoires are discursively pervasive and constraining. This research contributes to our knowledge of talk regarding female genitals by illustrating how and to what ends women choose to organize, interpret and exclusively use existing discourses on this topic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the women who generously shared their thoughts and feelings for this research. They are all amazing women who truly believe in making the world a better place for all women.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Linda McMullen for her professional guidance and support during the developmental, preparatory, and editorial phases of my thesis proposal. Her kindness and generous support motivated me many times to plug on and complete my research. As well, I would like to thank Dr. Karen Lawson for her kindness and her generous spirit. I truly appreciate all the times that she was available in her office just to listen to me and offer me encouragement to do my best. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Michel Desjardins for his inspiring encouragement that motivated me to think outside of the box and explore my full potential.

DEDICATION

To Amanda and Scott:

I love you more than words can say.

You are my inspiration and my greatest joy.

To Mom and Dad:

Thank you for all your love and support.

You are my role models and you motivate me to be the best I can be.

I love you very much.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Many feminists encourage women to talk about their genitals; however, for the most part, Western society has discursively constructed this as a ‘taboo’ topic (Braun, 1999a; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Wijma & Areskog-Wijma, 1987). According to radical feminist¹ psychological research and literature, the concept of the vagina is reluctantly tolerated in our society, however, most women and men are uninformed about the remaining components of a female’s genitals (i.e., clitoris, labia, vulva; Ardener, 1987; Fromm-Reichmann, 1995; Johnson, 1999; Kalinich, 1993; Ussher, 1989; Wijma & Areskog-Wijma, 1987). In many Western societies women are taught from childhood that the word ‘vagina’ is more socially polite than ‘vulva’ when describing the external area of female genitals (Ash, 1980; Kirby, 1998). Subsequently, ‘vagina’ has been socially constructed as the general term for female genitals in children’s books and other media sources, such as plays, movies, biographical and self-help literature. For example, Eve Ensler, the creator of the worldwide production of *The Vagina Monologues*, admitted that she uses the term ‘vagina’ from a common sense perspective, to describe “all the bits down there” (Braun, 1999b, p. 515), as opposed to the medical meaning for the word (Braun, 1999b; Cheng, 2004; Renshaw, 2004). Ensler stated that ‘vagina’ is the only word that is not considered derogatory for female genitals. Further, she believed that society, as a whole, is just not comfortable talking about the more specific terminology for female genitals, and that this societal reluctance contributes to

the oppression of women and to the dearth of empirical and general knowledge about the discourse relevant to female genitals (Braun, 1999b).

As a member of the audience of a local production of *The Vagina Monologues*, and having seen the video of Enslin's solo production, it was evident to me, and to several women with whom I have discussed the production, that the talk about female genitals in this play could be themed into two categories: female genitals are powerless because they are dominated, suppressed, oppressed, abused, violated, and predominantly socially unacceptable; and that women need to demand respect and power for their genitals by publicly talking about them. This message is echoed by the underlying assumption of radical feminist research; that is, women are socially oppressed and suppressed in a patriarchal society, and they need to overcome this powerlessness by demanding respect, consideration and equality (Kitzinger, 1992; Wilkinson, 2000a). My preliminary interpretation of the ways female genitals are talked about in Western society, based on the message promoted by the radical feminist perspective and the example of *The Vagina Monologues*, is that discourse regarding female genitals can be organized into two opposing themes: powerless and powerful.

I contend in Chapter Three that this dichotomous messaging (i.e., powerful versus powerless interpretative repertoires [i.e., consistent patterns or groupings of terms and/or metaphors that act as the building blocks of discussions; Potter & Wetherell, 1987]) also is prevalent in the literature and in previous research that specifically examined and explored female genitals. Yet, how and to what ends do women organize their talk about female genitals? Do women construct and negotiate talk for their genitals that positions them, or locates them within the topic through ways of talking (Edley, 2001), at only one of these opposing poles? If so, is that position static or

flexible? If a woman's position is flexible, and she talks about herself in multiple and contradictory ways (i.e., ideological dilemmas; [Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1988; Edley, 2001]), how does she make sense of her position? What action or actions (e.g., persuasion, mocking, aligning) are women engaging in when they position themselves within these opposing interpretative repertoires? How do the local (i.e., the research conversation) and general contexts of talk (e.g., discussions about women's experiences with a doctor or intimate partner) influence how women talk about their genitals during a conversation with other women?

My thesis research explored these questions from Potter and Wetherell's (1987) empirical approach to social constructionism, and more specifically from the combined theoretical perspectives of feminist discursive psychology (Wilkinson, 2000a) and critical discursive psychology (Edley, 2001). The specific aims of my research were to: (a) briefly review a sample of the available textual resources (e.g., autobiographical and self-help literature, reviews of historical accounts, research) relevant to female genitals and identify the interpretative repertoires; (b) identify the interpretative repertoires that the participants in my research were drawing on during the course of their dyad conversational session, and compare these repertoires to those identified in my brief review of available textual resources; (c) explore the subject positioning, ideological dilemmas and discursive negotiation strategies (i.e., ways of talking that manage the apparent conflict in their positions that is appropriate for the rhetorical context [Edley & Wetherell, 1999]) of this sample of women as they constructed, defended and negotiated positioning on the topic of female genitals; and (d) analyze and interpret the power dynamics within the dyad conversational sessions.

Data were generated via a sample of eight women divided into four dyads. Each dyad met with me once for a period of two to three hours to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and practices regarding female genitals, and how information about female genitals from various sources (e.g., media, medical and educative literature) and social interactions influence their discursive subject positions on the topic of female genitals. Exploration and interpretation of how these women use talk to orient their constructed positions on the topic of female genitals, within this specific social context, was informed by the analytic concepts of interpretative repertoires, subject positioning and ideological dilemmas. My epistemology, theoretical perspectives, and analytic strategies are discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. Further, in Chapter Two I argue that a synthesis of the theoretical perspectives of feminist discursive psychology and critical discursive psychology was necessary to meet the goal of answering the aforementioned research questions.

1.1 Heuristic Motivation

My interest in exploring the constructed and negotiated discursive subject positions for women's genitals emerged from previous research I organized to develop a scale to measure female genital perceptions (Ellis, Brochu, Warkentin, & Buchanan, 2006). This research involved five focus groups with women, aged 18 to 64 years, who discussed the different physical components (e.g., vulva, labia, vagina, clitoris) of their genitals. Further, these women offered suggestions for relevant and representative methods of assessment that would allow researchers to quantitatively measure women's perceptions of their genitals. At this juncture, I believe it is pertinent to explain briefly my motivation for conducting the above-outlined research in order to provide a bridge between this research and the purpose of my thesis.

At the onset of the project on the development of a female genital perceptions scale there was only one known Female Genital Image Scale (FGIS; Ellis & Morrison, 2003; Morrison, Harriman, Morrison, Bearden, & Ellis, 2004) being used for empirical research. This scale was developed in much the same way many other sexuality scales are developed: from a purely objectivist standpoint, which involved an extensive literature review that facilitated the development of scale items in isolation of the target population (see Snell & Papini, 1989; Wiederman, 2000; Winter, 1989 for illustrative examples of scales developed in this fashion).

Scale development using this technique is considered acceptable and, with extensive psychometric testing, can produce a statistically reliable and valid measure. Unfortunately, although scales developed in this manner may demonstrate adequate reliability and construct validity (via convergent, discriminant, and factorial validity), they may possess low content (face) validity (Allen & Yen, 1979; DeVellis, 1991; Vogt, King, & King, 2004). In other words, the scale can be strong statistically but the instrument may actually be irrelevant and unrepresentative of the targeted construct in the population it is intended to evaluate. Possible reasons for this may include: (a) reliance on literature that is not directly representative of the construct the instrument is meant to evaluate; (b) development of scale items in isolation of the target audience; and/or (c) a lack of consideration of content (face) validity because it is considered highly subjective and more prone to error than other forms of validity, and therefore, not chosen as part of the psychometric testing. Although numerous authors have stressed the need for consultation with members of the target population (e.g., open-ended interviews and focus groups) to aid in initially identifying and describing important

constructs (e.g., DeVellis, 1991; Haynes, Richard, & Kubany, 1995; Vogt et al., 2004), this advice is rarely followed (Haynes et al., 1995; Smith & McCarthy, 1995).

Since I was involved in the development of the FGIS and administered it to participants in the initial research project in which the measure was used (Ellis & Morrison, 2003), I was familiar with its lack of content (face) validity. On several occasions, after distributing questionnaires containing this scale, women would sheepishly approach me and say that they had difficulties completing the “questions about their private parts.” Even though definitions were provided for the anatomical terms used to describe female genitals (e.g., “vulva [i.e., external genitals of a female]”; “outer lips [i.e., labia majora]”), some women said they were not certain *exactly* where some of the parts were located. As well, they did not feel comfortable or capable of determining their level of “satisfaction” with those parts of their genitals that required visual inspection and, in their minds, comparison to other women.

Even though this scale has been used in four empirical studies and demonstrated test-retest reliability and construct validity, content (face) validity has been overlooked (Bearden & Morrison, 2004; Brochu, Ellis, & Morrison, 2006; Ellis, Brochu, & Morrison, 2006; Morrison et al., 2004). As a researcher, I felt a sense of professional and personal obligation to build upon this previous research. Therefore, I designed a research project that *asked* women how *they* perceived and evaluated their genitals in order to develop a more relevant and representative instrument (Ellis et al., 2006). Specifically, the focus group method allowed my co-investigators and me to become informed about specific aspects of the key construct, female genitals, directly from a sample of the target population. We allowed the women participating in the research to guide us and we followed where they led. Subsequently, we were able to develop scale

items that addressed the physical concerns *women* expressed about their genitals, in familiar situational contexts (e.g., during sexual encounters, medical genital examinations), using an evaluation criterion that focused on frequency of occurrence rather than level of satisfaction (e.g., “I (would) worry about the smell of my genitals while menstruating” and “I (would) worry about the tightness of my vagina during vaginal intercourse,” assessed on a six-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*) with higher scores denoting more concern about the genitals).

During the course of the development of the female genital perceptions scale (Ellis et al., 2006), I learned more about women’s thoughts regarding their genitals besides how they would prefer to evaluate this private aspect of their bodies. A clear majority of these women expressed a strong desire to explore further ways of talking about female genitals and how this related to their genitals. Unfortunately, the pre-determined parameters of this research did not allow for the pursuit of this topic. On numerous occasions, against my scholarly and personal interest in exploring this phenomenon, time constraints forced me to rein-in the participants’ enthusiasm for the topic in order to fulfill our planned directives for the research project. Consequently, my unexplored questions about how and to what ends women position themselves in their talk when discussing their genitals have contributed to my interest in exploring this area of research.

From a personal perspective, I have been exposed to a variety of constructions of female genitals in various societal resources. For example, some media explicitly construct female genitals as suppressed and dominated (e.g., many pornography films portray women as sexually dominated); while other media (e.g., *The Sunday Night Sex Show*) construct female genitals as a positive aspect of a woman’s body that should be

valued and explored. As well, interactions with family, friends and health care professionals (e.g., physicians) have contributed to how I construct my genitals. In particular, some interactions with family, friends and intimate partners have positively influenced my construction of my genitals, whereby I feel empowered by my genitals and I actively construct and portray my genitals as a valuable and important part of who I am. However, some other interactions (e.g., abusive intimate relationships; the suppression of information about female genitals in early educational experiences and from my parents; some physicians constructing common female genital health concerns, such as yeast infections, as sociably unacceptable and an indication of amoral sexual practices) have negatively influenced my construction of my genitals, whereby I construct my genitals as a hindrance or a weakness that detracts from my construction of myself as a person. Since I have experienced numerous ways of constructing and reconstructing my position with regard to my genitals, my curiosity about whether other women had similar experiences with the construction of subject positions regarding their genitals, and female genitals in general, added to my interest in exploring this topic.

This juncture brings me back to the topic of my thesis, but before embarking upon this exploration of women's discursively constructed and negotiated subject positions for female genitals; my epistemological and theoretical framework is explained in Chapter Two. Chapter Three includes a review of select textual resources relevant to female genitals and I contend that the information is organized in a consistent pattern of contrary, dichotomous systems of terms (i.e., contradictory interpretative repertoires). Further, I assert that these interpretative repertoires have the potential to influence women's ways of talking when they are discursively constructing and negotiating subject positions regarding the topic of female genitals in the research context.

CHAPTER TWO – EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Constructionist Epistemology

Currently there is a dearth of research examining female genitals that is *not* (a) medically oriented (e.g., gynaecological problems [Ferroni & Taffe, 1997], genital health related [Stewart & Spencer, 2002]), (b) about physiological occurrences during orgasm (Maravilla, Cao, Heiman, Yang, Garland, Peterson et al., 2005), or (c) harms-based (e.g., genital injuries after sexual assault [Beukes, 1998], female genital mutilation [Whitehorn, Ayonrinde, & Maingay, 2002], possible negative influences of various indices of media [Davis, 2002] or implications of negative social sexual interactions [Christopher, 1988]). These empirical investigations were approached from an objectivist perspective, whereby the researchers strove to discover universal truths and facts about the general perceptions and/or attitudes women have about their physical genitals. Little is learned about how and to what ends a woman uses her talk to position herself on the topic of female genitals in general and her own genitals in particular. Further, to date no research on female genitals has allowed women to discursively construct and negotiate, without pre-determined empirical restrictions (e.g., experiences of rape, degrading language, medical conditions, sexuality), subject positioning on the topic of female genitals.

The present research contributed to existing knowledge on the topic of female genitals by providing women with a forum to explore the various ways they discursively position themselves when talking about their genitals and women's genitals in general. This research adhered to Potter and Wetherell's (1987) more empirical version of social constructionism. From this perspective, people use their language, which is influenced by socially available discourses, "to *construct* versions of the social world" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 33, italics in original text) for a variety of discursive functions (e.g., persuading, requesting, accusing). The general function of discourse is to construct, negotiate and transmit versions of accounts of events which are "built out of a variety of pre-existing linguistic resources" (p. 33). The functions of discourse are actively selected for a particular purpose so as to position the person depending on the nature of the social interaction. The purpose of the discursive function and the subject positioning may be deliberate or as a means of reacting and making sense of an interaction; either way, there is a constructed consequence for the discursive act (e.g., someone is persuaded, a request is fulfilled, the discursive function is ignored). Further, variation, inconsistency and flexibility in accounts are expected, and the "constructive and flexible ways in which language is used should themselves become a central topic of study" (p. 35).

It is important to note that from this version of constructionism the researcher does not "intend to use the discourse as a pathway to entities or phenomena lying 'beyond' the text" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 49, single quotes in original text). Rather, focus is placed on the "discourse *itself*: how it is organized and what it is doing" (p. 49, italics in original text). The researcher is primarily interested in the use of language: "the way accounts are constructed and different functions" (p. 157) of the

discourse. Unlike some versions of social constructionism (e.g., Crotty, 1998) that include the researcher's use of imagination and active engagement in creative meaning making, Potter and Wetherell's (1987) version is not interested in "abstract notions of meaning" (p. 170). From Potter and Wetherell's (1987) approach, the researcher grounds the analysis firmly within the text, considering the participants' actual discursive constructions during an interaction and the possible implications for the practice of the discursive actions. Further, the researcher assumes an outsider's perspective when analysing the data. Consequently, the researcher does not conduct a self-analysis of the researcher's contribution to the data generated, which would be an integral component of some other versions of constructionism (e.g., Crotty, 1998). It is unavoidable that the mere presence of the researcher has the potential to influence the constructed positions of the participants; however, from Potter and Wetherell's (1987) approach the goal is to observe and interpret the participants' use of language and constructed positions inherent in the discourse, and construct conclusions by drawing on available knowledge from the broader context (i.e., review of the available information about the topic).

Potter and Wetherell's (1987) version of constructionism is considered a broad approach that focuses on the "constructive and functional dimensions of discourse" (p. 169) and the primary goal is to identify "significant patterns of consistency and variation" (p. 169) in the participants' accounts. Further, the concept of interpretative repertoires is just one component in this empirically systematic approach to studying discourse, and is best described as a preliminary step when exploring discursively constructed accounts and positions.

From this perspective, it is essential to explore beyond cognitive and physical processes (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Therefore, the exploration of women's ways of talking, when they are constructing and negotiating subject positions on the topic of female genitals, must account for more than just the physical sensations associated with different experiences (e.g., menstruation, childbirth, sexual intimacy). Research of this topic must include personal accounts of a woman's social milieu and of her social and physical interactions with other people. Women's discursively constructed subject positions are unavoidably influenced by the fluidity and reflexivity of their social environments. Recognizing and exploring these influences in women's ways of talking about female genitals will expand the existing body of knowledge regarding female genitals.

Since women are presented with a variety of socially and culturally available discourses regarding female genitals, it was reasonable to assume that diversity in exposure to assorted discourses of female genitals would result in diversity in the ways women talk and position themselves when they talk about this topic. However, as social beings, people need to orient to each other's talk and subject positions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Therefore, they must share some recurrent social discourses on a particular topic. This idea will be discussed further in the section of this chapter on interpretative repertoires.

2.2 Feminist Discursive Theoretical Perspective

Wilkinson's (2000a) approach to feminist discursive psychology combines a radical feminist approach to research and discursive psychology. In particular, the radical feminist approach aims to reclaim and validate the experiences of women (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997). The underlying assumption of this approach is that

women are oppressed and suppressed in societies (Wilkinson, 2000a). This branch of feminism claims that men construct versions of reality to justify male experiences and interpretations of events, people, and objects. As such, the goal of radical feminist research is to reclaim and validate women's experiences and interpretations, and to challenge the socially available patriarchal constructions of phenomena (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997). This goal is not unique to radical feminist research. However, it does limit the scope of the type of research in which researchers adhering to this perspective will engage.

Discursive psychology can be defined as the study of talk as a type of action (Wilkinson, 2000a; Wilkinson, 2000b). This theoretical perspective concentrates on identifying and analysing people's understanding of what their discourse is doing as it is presented in the immediate context of the discursive interaction. The basic assumption of this theoretical perspective is that the researcher has access only to the participants' constructed and negotiated versions of reality in the local context of the research conversation. Further, this approach does not seek to discover beliefs, attitudes or perceptions, nor does it aim to develop universal truths or broad generalizations. Therefore, theorization and interpretation of constructed positioning for a phenomenon must be made in relation to the context in which it was generated.

The underlying assumption of the blended theoretical perspective of feminist discursive psychology is that women are socially oppressed and suppressed in society, and that by talking women can display their meaningful realities for the topic being explored, as well as how they flexibly take up available social discourses (Wilkinson, 2000a). Further, this approach takes seriously what women have to say by hearing what their talk is doing, and how those understandings are displayed in the talk itself.

2.3 Critical Discursive Theoretical Perspective

The critical discursive theoretical approach is an assortment of discursive analytic strategies that are predominantly “macroanalytical” because critical data analysis goes beyond the structure of language to include “drawing attention to social practices on a large scale” (Wood & Kroger, 2000, pp. 21-22). Critical discursive research adopts a dual approach to data analysis that captures the inconsistencies that often exist between the talk and the speaker (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). Put simply, the main focus is on what people say, how they say it, and to what end the talk is used (van Dijk, 1993; Willig, 2003). Critical discursive researchers acknowledge that people are simultaneously the constructors and constructions of discourse, and that talk is a form of performance or action. Discourse is a means of *doing* something (e.g., persuading others, approving decisions, conveying orders; Edley, 2001). Therefore, we need to consider the reflexivity of talk, and more specifically that talk is concurrently *about* phenomena and *part of* those phenomena (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

From this perspective, talk and action are inextricably bound up with each other (Edley, 2001). Discourse is a social practice and we must analyse the talk and to what ends it is used in conjunction with social and political relationships and structures, as well as the power that is dispersed among them (van Dijk, 1993). Societies have powerful gatekeepers that have the potential to influence and shape the beliefs, values and ideologies of the societies through standards that are set to differentiate what is acceptable and unacceptable. Critical discursive research expects, draws attention to, and freely discusses the various ways power, authority and inequality are communicated, sanctioned and represented in the content and construction of talk and text (van Dijk, 1999).

In the specific context of a research situation, the participants' knowledge of shared societal discourses is fragmented, and may be inconsistent and contradictory (Edley, 2001). However, the reflexive nature of this approach affords an opportunity to understand how the shared societal values, beliefs, and practices (i.e., ideologies) on a topic come to add to the structure of everyday life of a particular group of research participants. A critical discursive analyst bases analytic claims on identifiable patterns constructed and negotiated in the participants' talk (i.e., interpretative repertoires), as well as the information that is available in society about a topic and that is used by participants to orient themselves in talk (i.e., subject positioning and ideological dilemmas; Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Quinn & Radtke, 2006; Willig, 2003). Further, the researcher draws on available knowledge from a broad context to assist in the interpretation of discursive patterns and to construct conclusions about the implications of the discursive patterns.

Inherent in this approach is not only the need to represent the participants, but also the acknowledgment that the researcher has a vested interest in the research (van Dijk, 1993). Consequently, critical discursive researchers must be self-reflexive when interpreting and analysing their data. The researcher should constantly ask, "Why am I reading this passage this way? What features produce this reading?" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 168). Some distance must be maintained between the data and their own personal beliefs on the topic, while simultaneously acknowledging personal biases. This distance and awareness of personal biases helps to guard against the researcher simply producing self-fulfilling analyses. The researchers' main goal is to work with the participants to understand the society they live in, instead of proclaiming universal truths and solutions to perceived social problems.

2.3.1 Interpretative Repertoires

By analysing the different ways that people can talk about a subject, we can begin to understand the potential limitations that exist for the construction of subject positions, and for understanding other people, events, and objects (Edley, 2001).

Interpretative repertoires are recurrently used sources of information people can access when constructing and negotiating talk (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 2000). They are the meaningful discourses regarding phenomena that provide the “building blocks of conversation” that people access and use in social interactions (Edley, 2001, p. 198). Often these repertoires are hegemonic, or socially dominant, because people construct them as being accurate descriptions of their social world, a form of common sense that is based on familiar, shared social understandings. This familiarity can be so pervasive that sometimes all it takes is a fragment of the rhetoric chain in a conversation to provide an adequate basis for people to jointly recognize the version of reality that is being constructed during their interaction (Edley & Wetherell, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Seymour-Smith, Wetherell & Phoenix, 2002).

Due to the ever-changing array of social situations a person is faced with over the course of time (e.g., a day, a year, a lifetime), she or he will draw upon many different interpretative repertoires, used in sequence or in conjunction with each other, to suit the immediate needs of each social situation (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Specific interpretative repertoires are used to construct objects, events or people in a particular way according to the social function of the discourse that is being offered at any one moment. For example, a woman may draw on very different interpretative repertoires when discursively constructing her orientation regarding a topic in a conversation with

her mother, her intimate partner, her doctor, her friends, and herself, because the goal or social purpose is different for each conversation (Stephens, Carryer, & Budge, 2004).

Identifying interpretative repertoires involves systematically searching the data for consistent patterns or content that indicates features of the accounts that are shared (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). They are usually organized around basic lexicons or clusters of themes, terms, ideas, images, and/or metaphors that are socially available to provide a means of evaluating events, actions, people and objects. Studying interpretative repertoires is just one strategy in a systematic approach to organizing and critically analysing discourse.

Traditionally, many of the phenomena that have been studied using interpretative repertoires have also been analyzed by social psychologists in terms of beliefs, attitudes and attributions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The difference in approaching discursive phenomena from the perspective of interpretative repertoires is that this strategy gives little attention to the cognitive processes involved in linking representations to available social categories (as is the case in social representation theory; Potter & Wetherell, 1995). Rather, it focuses on the way that social categories are discursively constructed *as* representations in the talk. The researcher is interested in the uses and functions of interpretative repertoires and the situations that are constructed by their existence (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discursive researchers are not interested in whether participants are cognizant of the repertoires, just whether the repertoires are a genuine component of the participants' interpretative routines in talk. Consequently, the word "orient" (p. 153) is purposely used when referring to the functions and actions of the participants' talk, as opposed to "notice" or "understand" (p. 153) which imply cognitive processes. The goal

of this type of research is to arrive at a “genuinely social psychological approach” (Potter & Wetherell, 1995, p. 92) that is not restricted by cognitive reductionism.

Studying interpretative repertoires is considered a “coarse-grained analysis” because this type of discourse organization allows the researcher to identify discourse on a topic of interest at a relatively macro level, using broader units than is traditionally used in other discourse analytic strategies (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 80). As well, the study of interpretative repertoires is used by those researchers who want to emphasize how the flexible and reflexive use of language offers speakers a variety of rhetorical situations to demonstrate agency (Edley, 2001).

2.3.2 Subject Positioning

In addition to critically exploring talk as action, the critical discursive perspective involves analysing and interpreting how people’s subject positions (i.e., a person’s discursive locations in the talk about a topic) are constructed, and reconstructed, through discourse in and across particular contexts (Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Seymour-Smith et al., 2002). For example, a man may refer to a woman’s breasts as ‘boobs’ when he is talking with his friends in the privacy of his home, yet adopt the more ‘politically correct’ or socially acceptable label of ‘breasts’ when he is discussing the topic in the context of a gender-mixed formal education setting, such as a health or sexuality class. This perspective argues that subject positions are fluid, reflexive, situated and imposed upon by power dynamics in social interactions (e.g., actively arguing a position versus passively aligning with someone else’s position). A position is understood as something that is actively *achieved* through the use of specific argumentative discursive devices in the “micropolitical” (Edley & Wetherell, 1999, p. 182) context of social interactions. A subject position is regarded as an

outcome rather than a *reason* for social interactions (Edley, 2001). For example, a woman constructing a more powerful position on the topic of female genitals by listing off possible reasons for how sexually explicit materials can negatively influence a woman's construction of her genitals is an outcome of the rhetorical talk between people; the construction of her powerful discursive position is not considered the reason for the social interaction.

As well, this approach considers how history and shared societal ideologies intrude upon and are changed by people's positions. Different social situations allow people to exert agency and discursively 'experiment' with different subject positions. However, there is no guarantee that the position someone constructs will be accepted in any given social context. Consequently, since most people are social beings they are often drawn to available socially acceptable discourses (constructed from societal ideologies) when constructing a position specific to each social situation. Further, even though we can sometimes construct new terms in our language, our discourse about ourselves and others will usually be in terms of the language or discourse that is provided to us by social, cultural and historical resources.

Most social situations have a set of discursive practices that inform the way someone would speak in a given context (Edley, 2001). Often many of these discourses become so familiar, so routinized and automatic that people can misinterpret the influence of history with nature. For example, using passive verbs to describe the function of female genitals (e.g., the vagina receives the penis) and active verbs for male genitals functions (e.g., the penis thrusts into the vagina) are common constructions of male and female genitals in Western society, and people often consider these discursive constructions as part of the nature of humankind. Many people are oblivious to the way

the discourses regarding acceptable societal standards and practices are inscribed upon their subject positions and how they talk about other people, events, and objects. However, it is in talk that people's positions are constructed and negotiated. This is not to say that people do not have agency, just that the narratives involved in routine conversations position us and permit the positioning of others as individuals with functions and power in the social interaction (Seymour-Smith et al., 2002).

What is important to remember is that a person's subject position does not *have* to be contingent on the orientation assumed in the various discourses that are encountered. People are the owners of language and the producers of text (Seymour-Smith et al., 2002). They have the ability to strategically negotiate the discourses that construct their position. Consequently, in order to explore subject positioning, it is necessary to identify various discursive resources available in society (e.g., movies, newspaper articles, historical literature, empirical research), what the forms of discourse accomplishes in the local context of a conversation, and what the availability of the different positions tells us about "the broader ideological context in which such talk is done" (Edley, 2001, p. 217). However, analysis of subject positions can be difficult. The researcher must constantly be aware of who is being referred to by a particular interpretative repertoire and what the use of the repertoires says about the person who spoke them.

2.3.3 Ideological Dilemmas

Ideologies are inconsistent, fragmented, and contradictory sets of ideas, values, beliefs and practices that are considered to be common sense ways of life integrated into the discourse used by a society (Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The indeterminacy of ideologies constructs a rhetorical environment that fosters

opposing, often argumentative positions for the same social object (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988). For example, sexually explicit materials are dually constructed in Western societies: on one side they are socially constructed as deviant and socially unacceptable portrayals of sexuality, yet on the other side they are promoted as a positive means of exploring our physical form and sexuality. Further, ideologies construct subjects by enticing people into specific positions. How people orient themselves in conversations is partly due to the power of socially available ideological discourses, but also is influenced by the person's goal for engaging in the interaction.

Interpretative repertoires are part of the ideologies of a society because they are readily available ways of talking about people, objects, and events: the common sense discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). People draw on particular interpretative repertoires, or fragments of many different ones, to construct themselves in a particular way, in different social situations, depending on the goal of the discourse (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Quinn & Radtke, 2006). These repertoires assist in building and defending various subject positions. Ideological dilemmas occur when we use multiple and opposing ways of speaking about ourselves (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988; Edley & Wetherell, 2001). For example, a discursive ideological dilemma would be constructed if a woman argued that sexually explicit materials negatively influence a woman's sexual self-esteem and later, in the same social interaction, discussed the pleasure and sexual benefits she has experienced watching sexually explicit materials while engaging in intimate relations with a partner.

Ideological dilemmas are a common finding in interpretative repertoire research (e.g., Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 2001; Quinn & Radtke, 2006; Seymour-Smith et

al., 2002). This is due to the highly variable and often inconsistent use of interpretative repertoires when participants are positioning themselves according to the rhetorical demands of the immediate conversation (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988; Seymour-Smith et al., 2002). To understand how and to what ends participants have engaged in ideological dilemmas, it is necessary to analyse the rhetorical context within which the contrary interpretative repertoires were deployed (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988; Willig, 2003).

2.4 Importance of Combining the Feminist Discursive and Critical Discursive Theoretical Perspectives

Both feminist discursive theory and critical discursive theory adhere to the constructionist epistemology, study talk as action, and have social and political goals. However, the feminist discursive approach seeks to describe and ‘understand’ women’s experiences as they are displayed in the talk (Wilkinson, 2000a), whereas critical discursive theory moves beyond description to challenging the function of the participants’ talk as it appears in the immediate research context (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; van Dijk, 1993). According to the critical discursive perspective, the cognitive reductionism that is inherent in ‘understanding’ a phenomenon prevents analysis of how and to what ends people discursively ‘orient’ themselves, using available discursive resources (e.g., interpretative repertoires), when constructing and negotiating subject positions.

Further, critical discursive theory challenges the researcher to be self-reflexive in recognizing personal biases when analysing and interpreting the data (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1997) criticized radical feminist discursive researchers who display a personal bias through only reporting the experiences of

women who fit the political agenda of their research (i.e., women who report being oppressed and suppressed in a patriarchal society). Further, Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1997) stated that many radical feminist researchers do *not* ‘reclaim’ and ‘validate’ the experiences of every woman in their research. Rather, these researchers frequently employ strategies to omit data that are inconsistent with the goals of radical feminist research (e.g., not reporting the data, reporting these women as being victims of false consciousness and brainwashing, or considering the data inappropriate because the participant contradicted herself over the course of the research conversation). As an aside, with regard to the last example, critical discursive research considers multiple and contradictory ways of talking about oneself (i.e., ideological dilemmas) *as* the important information to identify and analyse (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988). Further, feminist discursive research does not explicitly recognize the construction of subject positions of research participants within the immediate context of the research situation (Wilkinson, 2000b). Contrary to this, critical discursive research not only recognizes participants’ constructed positions, but *explicitly* seeks to identify, analyse and interpret the flexible positions constructed and negotiated within the context of the research conversations (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988).

As well, critical discursive theory goes beyond just identifying societal influences to constructed subject positions (i.e., interpretative repertoires; Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). It is not enough to say that women talk about being oppressed and suppressed by patriarchal societal influences. Rather, critical discursive research seeks to identify if interpretative repertoires are genuine components of the participants’ discursive practices. Finally, feminist discursive research is primarily interested in analysing the discourse *about* the actions and events relevant to women

(Wilkinson, 2000a), whereas critical discursive research goes one step beyond this by also recognizing that women are *part of* the actions and events (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This focus on how and to what ends participants are part of the actions and events being analysed in the data draws attention to the power relations *within* the immediate discursive context, as opposed to just considering the *external* power dynamics that influence the ways women talk about their social situations.

As stated at the opening of this section, feminist discursive theory and critical discursive theory are compatible on the main theoretical principles. However, the goals of my thesis did not include simply identifying societal influences and understanding the cognitive functions of women as they discursively made sense of the topic of female genitals within the research context. I was interested in whether or not interpretative repertoires, systematically identified in the research and literature pertaining to female genitals, were genuine components of the women's interpretative practices during the research sessions. Further, I wanted to understand how and to what ends these women used various ways of talking to position themselves using socially available interpretative repertoires, and how they handled ideological dilemmas and power relations during the course of the dyad sessions. The use of this combined theoretical approach added to the existing knowledge about women's constructions of female genitals by exploring a *variety of ways* women talk about this topic, not just identifying and validating discourse relevant to powerlessness. Further, the influence of power relations within a conversation between women expands our understanding of how women use talk about social resources relevant to female genitals to influence each other's positions on the topic.

CHAPTER THREE – LITERATURE REVIEW

The first aim in my research was to systematically search a diverse selection of available textual resources (e.g., historical, fictitious, media, medical) relevant to female genitals in Western society, and identify the consistent patterns or content that indicated shared components of the resources (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). These patterns or content are organized around clusters of terms, themes, ideas, images, and/or metaphors that provide women with the “building blocks of conversation” (Edley, 2001, p. 198), which can be drawn upon and used during social interactions. In this chapter I identify the interpretative repertoires, some of the possible ends to which the repertoires are constructed, some of the means by which the repertoires can be made available to women in Western society (i.e., a selection of socially available textual resources), and how the resources support the repertoire. This information provides a foundation for comparing the interpretative repertoires identified in this brief summary to those identified in the conversations between the research participants.

This analysis is organized according to two opposing interpretative repertoires: the powerful female genital repertoire and the powerless female genital repertoire.

3.1 Powerful Female Genital Repertoire

The powerful female genital repertoire is constructed in opposition to the powerless female genital repertoire. The powerful repertoire constructs female genitals as important to and as accepted and valued by society. The powerfulness of female

genitals is a positive goal for women to aspire to, yet it is dependent on the social milieu and on women valuing their genitals and being active and responsible for how they are constructed. Often the word “empowerment” is used to distinguish this form of personal agency from the physical aspects of power associated with male dominance (e.g., rape; Kitzinger, 1992). The textual resources I reviewed in constructing the powerful female genital repertoire included reviews of historical texts from the 1500s to the 1700s, sexuality research in the 20th century, early educative endeavours by liberal feminists in the 1960s and 1970s (via film, art, photography), current references regarding sexual education (e.g., television shows, sexually explicit films and literature), and recent research exploring some genital health practices of women (e.g., self-treatment of genital yeast infections).

Historical texts from the 1500s to the 1700s constructed powerful female genitals as accepted and valued in some patriarchal societies, and important to the propagation of human beings (Kirby, 1998). For example, although this period of history prescribed to the “one-sex model of anatomy” (p. 29, i.e., the male body was the primary reference point and women had the same sexual organs as men, just turned inside the body), female sexual gratification was viewed as paramount to human reproduction (pp. 29-33). The sexual pleasuring of women was freely discussed, and in French cultures the clitoris was heralded as the core of a woman’s sexual pleasure and the trigger point for orgasm. Since it was believed that a woman must reach orgasm to become pregnant, society fostered the importance of a woman’s orgasm. Women were constructed as active sexual beings, full of passion and desired for their fleshiness. Manuals written for midwives in the 17th century offered multiple techniques for genital stimulation aimed at

bringing a woman to orgasm. It was a cultural expectation that this knowledge would be freely shared and promoted.

This favourable societal milieu regarding female genitals remained dominant in Western societies until the 19th century (Kirby, 1998). At this time, new societal ideologies regarding female genitals were constructed and became socially pervasive. For example, the genital stimulation and sexual satisfaction of women were no longer actively promoted. Instead, the medical community highlighted the biological differences between men and women and placed greater emphasis and importance on the sexual needs of men. Women expressing sexual desires were diagnosed as having a disease and their sexuality was often silenced through medical treatments. The construction of oppression of female genitals during this era is discussed further in the powerless female genital repertoire. This ‘taste’ for the powerless repertoire is offered in support of how the powerful female genital repertoire is constructed in opposition to the powerless female genital repertoire in some groups of text, and how the powerful repertoire is contingent on the prevailing social milieu.

In the 20th century, societal ideologies began shifting again to the powerful nature of female genitals (Jackson, 1987). This trend toward the reconstruction of the powerful repertoire was fostered by early sexuality research promoting the sexual liberation of women. Researchers such as Havelock Ellis (early 1900s to the 1930s), Alfred Kinsey (1940 to the 1950s), and William Masters and Virginia Johnson (1960s through the 1980s) explored the positive aspects of female sexuality and genital responsiveness (Jackson, 1987; Kirby, 1998; Kulish, 1991). In particular, the research conducted by Masters and Johnson reconstructed the clitoris from being unimportant to female

sexuality (as constructed in the 19th century) to an important contributor to the female orgasm (Jayne, 1984).

The reconstruction of the powerful repertoire during this time was not limited to the scientific community. In the 1960s and 1970s, numerous liberal feminists publicly endeavoured to educate women on the various positive physical and sexual aspects of their genitals, and challenged the socially and individually constructed stigma of shame attached to women's pursuit of genital awareness and knowledge (Ardener, 1987). For example, Anne Severson's (1972, as cited in Johnson, 1999) film *Near the Big Chakra*, which portrayed 38 women's vaginas, was made with the intent of assisting women in understanding and developing a positive relationship with their genitals. Other feminist filmmakers followed suit with such films as *Women I Love* (1976, as cited in Johnson, 1999) and *Multiple Orgasm* (1977, as cited in Johnson, 1999). These films tried a more subtle approach to familiarizing women with the aesthetic side of their genitals by superimposing images of flowers and landscapes on female masturbatory activities. The relationship between these films and socially accepted aesthetic images constructed female masturbation as positive, natural and beautiful. Further, Dempsey and Millan's (1990, as cited in Wray, 2000) short film for the National Film Board of Canada, entitled *Five Feminist Minutes: We're Talking Vulva*, promoted the positive aspects of talking about female genitals by having a performer costumed as a five-foot tall talking vulva present educational information regarding female genitals and sexuality. The film was designed to construct female genitals as visible and a socially acceptable topic of conversation.

Liberal feminist artists and photographers also contributed to the reconstruction of the powerful repertoire. In the early 1970s, Susanne Santoro offered a public display

of her collection of photographs depicting the structure of women's genitals in comparison to cross-sections of flowers (Johnson, 1999). The intent was to show women and men that a woman's genitals are aesthetically pleasing and as delicate as a flower. Around the same time, in response to cartoon, literature, and film depictions of the dangerous 'toothed vagina' (discussed in the powerless repertoire), a feminist artist, Judy Chicago, created the best-known work of art depicting women's genitals in *The Dinner Table* (Ardener, 1987; Ussher, 1989). For five years she worked with a skilled team of co-workers on constructing a 46-½ foot long triangular table. Displayed on each side of the table were 13 different handcrafted plates depicting a variety of imagery intended to draw parallels between flower shapes, butterflies, shells and a woman's genitals (Ardener, 1987).

Supporters of liberal feminist films, photography, and artwork that constructed female genitals as powerful and beautiful proclaimed these social resources as empowering masterpieces of ingenuity and inspiration (Ardener, 1987; Johnson, 1999). However, not all the reviews were positive. For the most part, these feminist pioneers of genital awareness were reproached for their public boldness. They were accused of pushing the socially constructed boundaries between what is acceptable (i.e., feminist film, photography, and art) and unacceptable (i.e., public displays of female genitals and masturbation). Some women went as far as likening the public displays of powerful female genitals to pornography, which at this time was constructed as socially unacceptable. The debate between the advocacy for and resistance to the public promotion of female genitals as visible, acceptable, and valuable in this era supports how the powerful repertoire is contingent on the social milieu and women valuing their genitals and being active and responsible for how they are constructed.

The resistance of some women to adopt the powerful repertoire as a genuine component of their interpretative practices did not dissuade liberal feminists from the 1960s and 1970s from continuing to promote this positive construction of female genitals. Rather, liberal feminists adopted a more ‘inside-out approach.’ That is, women were encouraged to embrace their genitals by taking a hand held mirror to privately examine their genitals on a regular basis to get acquainted, comfortable, and intimate with the ‘natural’ beauty of their genitals (Johnson, 1999). This promotion of the private discovery of female genitals continues to be transmitted in modern-day via sex education television programs (e.g., *The Sunday Night Sex Show* with Sue Johanson), women’s magazines (e.g., *Cosmopolitan*), and ‘ask a professional’ columns in most national newspapers (Armstrong, 2004). Further, these resources encourage women to embrace the positive aspects of privately accessing erotic films and literature (Rogala & Tyden, 2003; Striar & Bartik, 1999). These resources are promoted as a means of learning about female genitals and masturbatory sex that, in turn, is thought to enhance female sexual health and well-being. Erotic resources are constructed as the ‘acceptable’ alternative to more graphic sexually explicit materials, which many feminists criticize as promoting a narrow, distorted view of the external components of female genitals and setting an unrealistic standard for the ‘ideal’ form of genitals (Bramwell, 2002). These examples of modern-day media resources further support the powerful repertoire by promoting the powerful nature of female genitals as a positive goal to aspire to and that women should value their genitals.

One of the most popular media resources promoting the powerful repertoire is Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*. Productions of this vagina-friendly performance have sparked worldwide interest (Braun, 1999b; Cheng, 2004; Renshaw, 2004). In a

personal interview, Enslar attributed the success of the production to women's growing intolerance of the historical, cultural, physical, and emotional abuse of their genitals and the desire women have to reclaim power over their genitals (Braun, 1999b). This production epitomizes the powerful female genital repertoire. Specifically, the importance and value of female genitals is constructed in opposition to the violation, abuse, and oppression of female genitals in societies. The production promotes women being active participants in how female genitals are constructed, yet acknowledges that ideologies regarding female genitals are contingent on social contexts.

Finally, further support for the tenets of the powerful repertoire also can be found in psychological research exploring how women approach treatment of health concerns for their genitals (i.e., yeast infections; Theroux, 2002). Results from this study indicated that 10 of the 11 women self-diagnosed and sought over-the-counter treatments for this condition. The researchers constructed an understanding of this behaviour as a four-stage process they labelled "bypassing the middleman" (p. 428), meaning the physician. The female participants reported that they wanted to relieve their symptoms in what *they* believed to be the quickest, most convenient and efficient manner possible. As well, these women reported that practicing self-diagnosis and self-treatment perpetuated positive feelings related to being active and responsible for their genitals. Juxtaposed with these positive feelings were feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with discussing this problem with a doctor for fear of unfavourable moral and sexual judgment. This example demonstrates how the powerful repertoire (i.e., being actively responsible) is constructed in opposition to the powerless repertoire (i.e., social stigma and unacceptability by the medical profession). As well, it

supports the premise of women valuing their genitals and being active and responsible for how they are constructed.

3.2 Powerless Female Genital Repertoire

The powerless female genital repertoire is constructed as an argument that demonstrates how female genitals are abused, violated, dominated, oppressed, suppressed and predominantly socially unacceptable and invisible in Western society. Partly in response to the need for women to construct a powerful female genital position, this repertoire describes external barriers which hinder respect, consideration and equality for women's genitals. The resources reviewed often combined the concepts of physical powerlessness (e.g., sexual dominance and assault) and a lack of agency (e.g., lack of personal choice in sexual situations, lack of options to learn about female genitals). The textual resources involved in constructing the powerless female genital repertoire included media sources (e.g., commercial advertisements, television shows, films, fiction and non-fiction literature) and psychological literature and research.

3.2.1 Abuse, Violation, Domination, and Oppression

Textual resources relevant to the abuse, violation, domination, and oppression of female genitals, construct an argument that rape (Beukes, 1998; Crawford, Kippax, & Waldby, 1994; Eichler, 1975; Gilfoyle, Wilson, & Brown, 1992) is a serious external barrier that hinders respect, consideration and equality for women's genitals. For example, some radical feminist literature accused daytime soap operas of perpetuating the romanticization and desensitization of rape and the helplessness of women to protect themselves from aggressive male sexual behaviours (Donaldson, 1993; Haile, 2002). One instance of this is a storyline in *General Hospital* that had an older Luke Spencer rape a very young and newly married Laura Baldwin (Donaldson, 1993). At first this

segment was portrayed as a sexual violation with no justice for the victim. But as the storyline evolved, the sexual physical assault committed by Luke, against Laura, was reconstructed as a type of male seduction. Luke became a romantic figure courting the woman he eventually marries.

Some radical feminist authors contended that this romanticization and desensitization of rape extends beyond the limits of daytime soap operas to include fictional movies such as *Hollow Man*, 2000 and *Interview with a Vampire*, 1994 (Haile, 2002; Parental Television Council Publications, 2005; Roberts, 1999; The Ethical Spectacle, November 1995). These films contain scenes that construct a seductive atmosphere (via music and camera movement and angles) during the sexual assault of a female character. Other examples of the romanticization of rape include contemporary romance novels such as Harlequin Romances (Coles & Shamp, 1984; Roberts, 1999; Sterk, 1986), and the Biblical story of Shechem and Dinah where Shechem rapes Dinah and then later becomes a romantic hero who professes his love for Dinah and marries her (Donaldson, 1993). Further, primetime television shows such as *Cold Case* and *CSI: Miami* (Haile, 2002; Parental Television Council Publications, 2005; Roberts, 1999; The Ethical Spectacle, November and December 1995) have been accused of frequently graphically portraying rape scenarios, thereby contributing to desensitization of the viewing public to this crime. Coupled with this critique is the criticism of the sexual violence portrayed in some sexually explicit films (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Caplan, 1987; Eichler, 1975; Roberts, 1999). These resources are charged, by radical feminists, with perpetuating and reinforcing a modern constructed ideology which is a barrier that hinders women from constructing a sense of power for their genitals. In particular, these resources are accused of constructing woman as powerless to protect their genitals,

change their destiny with regard to sexual domination and oppression, and/or receive true justice for the acts of sexual aggression committed by men against women and female genitals (Beukes, 1998; Crawford et al., 1994; Eichler, 1975; Gilfoyle et al., 1992).

As well, daily news coverage (e.g., local and national newspapers, television news programs) has been criticized by radical feminist writers for contributing to the construction of powerlessness for female genitals (Beukes, 1998; Muscio, 2002; Roberts, 1999). Reported statistics such as a woman is raped every four minutes in the United States, and that one in every five women will have been sexually assaulted by the age of 21, are constructed as providing support for the argument that female genitals are powerless. Further, news stories that highlighted desensitization (regarding the frequency of sexual assaults against women) by governmental officials construct a possible subtle shift in ideologies regarding female genitals in some Western societies. For example, it was reported that the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr. demonstrated little shock when they were informed of the increase in reported and publicized rapes in the military and on university and college campuses in the United States (Roberts, 1999). The official presidential statements commented that the dramatic increase in women's educational and professional status in Western society is a contributing factor to rising rape rates. This statement was justified by saying that the opportunities for women to be raped have increased with the societal shift of women from housewives to professionals.

The abuse, violation, domination and oppression of female genitals are constructed as perpetual, longstanding social issues that impede powerful female genitals. Further, women are often constructed as the instigators of the social acts that

contribute to the powerlessness of female genitals (Muscio, 2002; Roberts, 1999; Tanenbaum, 2000). For instance, the previous example regarding the increased presence of women at universities and in the workforce providing more opportunities for women to be raped constructs a circumstantial causal link between these two phenomena. In other words, the cultural shift from women-at-home to women-in-the-workforce has somehow instigated the increase in reported rapes. Further to this point, autobiographical radical feminist literature argues that society automatically assumes that girls and women who are raped initiated the act in some fashion (e.g., by wearing provocative clothing, using alcohol and illegal drugs, being alone with a date, walking alone at night; Tanenbaum, 2000). This construction of the instigating female was presented by Tanenbaum (2000) as a barrier that women must overcome if they are to adopt a position consistent with the powerful female genital repertoire. However, adherence to this imposed condition on the powerful repertoire creates an ideological dilemma. That is, to adopt the powerful position one must change certain actions (e.g., what we wear, what we do, where we go, who we go with) that may symbolize part of that powerful position. It is the case, then, that one must give up some power to be powerful? Unfortunately, the textual resources that I reviewed do not allow for an analysis of this question. However, I do speculate on this question as part of some additional analyses in Chapter Six.

Finally, psychological research relevant to the abuse, violation, domination, and oppression of female genitals constructs an argument that ritualistic female circumcision (constructed by Western societies as female genital mutilation; Buckman, 1995; Lax, 2000; Nwajei & Otiono, 2003; Odu, 2004; Whitehorn, et al., 2002), and the verbal degrading of female genitals by men (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001c; Carr & VanDeusen,

2004; Murnen, 2000) also are external barriers that hinder respect, consideration and equality of female genitals. Western psychological research relevant to female circumcision argues that this phenomenon is pervasive (approximately 100 million women affected worldwide) and psychologically damaging (e.g., low self-esteem, loss of trust, lack of bodily well being, psycho-sexual dysfunction, post-traumatic stress disorder) to the women who experience it (Buckman, 1995; Lax, 2000; Nwajei & Otiono, 2003; Odu, 2004; Whitehorn, et al., 2002). However, the majority of the research on this topic adopts a Eurocentric approach and does not consider the cultural significance of this procedure. That is not to say that women are not physically and psychologically injured by this procedure, just that this Western-biased argument is purposively included in the ideology of Western society to add support to the argument for the powerlessness of female genitals.

Further, research examining the language men use to describe female genitals and their sexual interactions with women serves as added support for the argument that female genitals are verbally abused and dominated. This research argued that heterosexual men are more comfortable with, and frequently use, sexually degrading terminology for female genitals such as pussy, cunt, clit, muff, beard, twat (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001c; Carr & VanDeusen, 2004; Murnen, 2000). As well, the use of this 'degrading' terminology was linked by some researchers (e.g., Carr & VanDeusen, 2004) to negative male attitudes about female genitals, and is constructed as contributing to male sexual coercion, aggression, and de-sensitivity to a woman's expressed wish to stop sexual intimacy.

This brief summary of the textual resources pertaining to the abuse, violation, domination and oppression of female genitals supports the argument that women are

faced with numerous external barriers that hinder respect, consideration and equality for their genitals. From this perspective, if a woman is to adopt a powerful position regarding her genitals, she will need to find strategies to overcome these socially constructed barriers.

3.2.2 Suppression, Social Unacceptability and Invisibility

Textual resources relevant to the suppression, social unacceptability and invisibility of female genitals include a review of references regarding the mythological concept of the dangerous vagina (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001), historical and current medical literary resources, and product and service advertisements targeting women. As well, psychological research exploring the suppression, unacceptability and invisibility of female genitals provides additional support for the argument that female genitals are constructed as powerless in Western society.

Some radical feminist authors argue that female genitals are promoted in the media as socially dangerous and unacceptable (e.g., Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Gerhard, 2000). For example, the reoccurring theme of the biting ‘toothed’ vagina (*vagina dentata*), the devouring vagina (*penis captivus*), and large vaginas swallowing up men is discussed and illustrated in various textual resources (e.g., mythology, literature, folklore, 20th century films such as *Alien* [1979], *Blade Runner* [1982]; Beit-Hallahmi, 1985; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Gerhard, 2000; Hobby, 2000; Otero, 1996; Rudnytsky, 1999). The visual symbolization of the ‘toothed’ vagina in some artwork and films takes the form of dangerous creatures such as deadly spiders, crabs or lobsters, piranhas, snakes or eels with teeth, and praying mantis. In radical feminist literature this symbolization is argued as being constructed to promote the need for suppression and invisibility of female genitals (Markus, 2000; Otero, 1996), and is an external social

barrier that women must overcome if they are to adopt a position consistent with the repertoire of the powerful female genital. What this literature does not consider is whether what has been constructed as a barrier (i.e., the promotion of female genitals as dangerous) also can be constructed as a symbol of power (i.e., what is dangerous is not powerless). Again, the reviewed literature has constructed a question that cannot be explored using the textual resources in this summary. However, I do speculate on this question as part of some additional analyses in Chapter Six.

As mentioned previously, the construction of female genitals changed in the 19th century (Fromm-Reichmann, 1995; Kirby, 1998; Roth, 2004). The pervasive promotion of genital stimulation and sexual satisfaction of women during the 16th to the 18th centuries was no longer actively promoted in the 19th century. Instead, the medical community constructed an ideology of suppression for female genitals by placing greater emphasis and importance on the sexual needs of men. This new ideology considered female genitals as a private matter, and constructed a ‘well-bred’ woman in society as a passive receptacle for a man’s sexual impulses. The women who pursued sexual gratification from clitoral stimulation were constructed as socially deviant (i.e., suffering from an inherited, biological disease called nymphomania) and were medically treated.

This ideology regarding female genitals shifted slightly with the introduction of Freud’s theories of sexuality (as cited in Kirby, 1998). According to Freud, women were no longer to suppress their sexual desires. Instead, the vagina was constructed as the functional centre of a woman’s sexuality, and sexual desires should be redirected back into procreative functions. Some writers (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001a; Kirby, 1998; Moore & Clarke, 1995) argue that this shift in ideology contributed to the construction

of a societal acceptance of the physiological and reproductive nature of the vagina, and the stigmatization and invisibility of the clitoris in Western society.

The ideology regarding female genitals continues to evolve in some current textual resources. For example, a new social trend that has become popular in the last decade is the development of products and techniques designed to assist with the “beautification and normalization” of female genitals (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001b, p. 264). This trend is constructed in the literature as an effort intended to make the concept of female genitals more socially acceptable. In support of this argument, radical feminist literature (e.g., *Cunt: A declaration of independence* [Muscio, 2002]) and research (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001b; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Johnson, 1999) contend that television commercials and magazine ads promote the idea that women need fresh smelling feminine hygiene products (e.g., menstrual pads, douches) to cover up their natural genital scent. Further, advertisements for trimming, waxing (e.g., the Brazilian), and shaving female pubic hair are readily available in Western societies. Mason (2004) argues that these advertisements construct female genitals as dirty, smelly, and disgusting and in need of being masked and altered if they are to be socially acceptable (Mason, 2004).

Taking the argument of the “beautification and normalization” (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001b, p. 264) of female genitals one step further, some medical professionals are promoting medical procedures designed to create a ‘designer vagina.’ These aesthetic medical procedures are intended to tighten the vagina, trim labial tissue, liposuction the pubic mound, enhance the vulva with fat injections, and reconstruct the hymen (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001b; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Creese, 2005; Davis, 2002; Oh, 2000). An example demonstrating the sanctioning and promotion of these

procedures by medical professionals comes from a regular column in the *Life* section of the *Toronto Star* newspaper that features medical advice from two local physicians (Levine & Sacks, 1992). In one issue, an 18-year-old woman asked for advice because her boyfriend said her labia minora is too long and dark. She tells the advice columnists that she is uncomfortable discussing this with her family doctor and wants to know what to do. The columnists initially reassure her that labia minora vary in size and colour, however, then proceed to suggest that she might consider going to a gynaecologist to investigate the possibility of having her labia cosmetically augmented to make it more acceptable. Radical feminist authors (e.g., Braun & Kitzinger, 2001b; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Creese, 2005; Davis, 2002; Oh, 2000) argue that this explicit promotion of constructed societal standards for female genitals in Western societies contributes to the powerlessness of female genital by constructing an ideology that female genitals are socially unacceptable in their natural form. The socially desirable female genitals is constructed as a tight vagina (preferably virginal), invisible labia, and a hairless or well-trimmed pubic area.

Finally, psychological research exploring the language used in medical textbooks (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001a; Gerhard, 2000; Moore & Clarke, 1995; Scully & Bart, 2003) constructs these textual references as promoting the suppression, unacceptability, and invisibility of female genitals. For example, Scully & Bart (2003) reported that the language used in current medical textbooks promoted the vagina as a receptacle for sperm and that it is abnormal for a woman to desire anything but sexual submission to a man. Further research exploring the language used in medical textbooks (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001a; Gerhard, 2000) found that 'vagina' was frequently defined using passive verbs (e.g., receives, serves, allows) in comparison to the active verbs used to

describe 'penis' (e.g., ejaculates, discharges, enters, fertilizes). Other researchers (Lloyd, Crouch, Liao, & Creighton, 2005; Moore & Clarke, 1995) reported that references to the clitoris are sparse in medical textbooks in comparison to references to the penis. This body of research is constructed as support for the argument that female genitals are suppressed and invisible in the available social resources in Western societies.

Further support for the argument that female genitals are constructed as suppressed, socially unacceptable and invisible in Western societies is found in psychological research examining appropriate labelling of genitals by parents for their young children (Bem, 1989; de Marneffe, 1997; Kirby, 1998; Senet, 2004). For example, research investigating parental practices for educating children (15 to 36 months of age) about male and female genitals found that parents provided boys with appropriate anatomical names for their genitals more often than they did with girls (de Marneffe, 1997; Senet, 2004). As well, parents of young participants instructed their daughters on the genital terminology for both sexes, but tended to instruct their sons primarily on the male genital anatomy (Bem, 1989; de Marneffe, 1997; Kirby, 1998; Senet, 2004). According to the researchers, mothers of young male participants explained their hesitance to draw their son's attention to female genital anatomy because they believed it would constitute communication that would be considered excessively sexualized. Further, mothers of young female participants generally used the global term 'vagina' (avoiding identification of the clitoris, labia, and vulva) when discussing female genitals. It was reported that these mothers believed that doing so is more socially acceptable and less confusing; yet, they report taking the time to specifically identify and properly label the male genital anatomy for both their sons and daughters.

These researchers argue that these practices construct female genitals as socially unacceptable and invisible.

Further research consistent with the interpretative repertoire of powerless female genitals explored how often the external outline of female genitals was seen in women's magazines (Bramwell, 2002). Specifically, a content analysis of photographic images of female models in women's magazines (dating from 1997 to 2000) found that the models were often positioned (e.g., legs tightly crossed, one leg raised slightly, a piece of clothing or an object across their lap), or the picture was altered (e.g., writing or a symbol placed over the groin area, the image blurred around a woman's genitals) to ensure that the genital area of the female models was obscured from view. When the groin area was visible, it was shown as a smooth, non-distinct curve. Bramwell (2002) presented his results as evidence that female genitals are invisible in women's magazines.

3.3 Linking the Literature Review to the Present Research

Although I have provided only a brief summary of a selection of the information pertaining to female genitals that is available, I believe that the textual resources that I reviewed were diverse enough to demonstrate consistent patterns indicating shared components in these accounts. These shared components divided into opposing interpretative repertoires (i.e., powerful female genital repertoire and powerless female genital repertoire). Although previous research (e.g., Braun & Kitzinger, 2001a; Gerhard, 2000; Moore & Clarke, 1995; Scully & Bart, 2003) has explored textual information regarding female genitals, the goal of my research is to go beyond simply *identifying* the various sources of information about this topic (e.g., movies, books, magazines, empirical research).

From a critical discursive standpoint, interpretative repertoires *can* provide women with the “building blocks of conversation” (Edley, 2001, p. 198) to draw on and use during social interactions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Yet, having the option to draw on these repertoires and actually doing so are different things. Therefore, I will explore *if* women incorporate these interpretative practices in their ways of talking in a discursive interaction. Further, if women draw on interpretative repertoires, I will explore how and to what ends women position themselves using interpretative repertoires of female genitals, and how they negotiate constructed ideological dilemmas.

CHAPTER FOUR – METHODOLOGY

Data analysis for my thesis research was informed by the methodological approach of discourse analysis. The major assumption of this methodology is that social psychological topics of interest are constructed in and through talk (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Discourse analysis does not simply reproduce what is presumed to exist. Rather, it assumes that talk constructs the social world in a continual, progressive fashion. Data analysis consistent with this methodology has a dual focus (Willig, 2003). First, an emphasis is placed on the actions of discourse (e.g., persuasion, justification, responding to an assessment, aligning with like others, differentiating from adversaries, mocking), not just the content of the discourse (Willig, 2003; Wood & Kroger, 2000). Second, attention is given to the sorts of socially available resources (e.g., interpretative repertoires, stylistic and grammatical aspects, narrative characters) that people draw on during the course of discursive constructions and negotiations (Willig, 2003). Specifically, data analysis involves detailed attention to “the constructive and functional dimensions of discourse” through the systematic and sustained exploration of the “*context, variability and construction* of discursive accounts” (Willig, 2003, p. 165, italics in original text). As well, critical discursive analysis explores the argumentative (rhetorical) organization of discourse as it pertains to the construction and negotiation of ideological dilemmas (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988).

Discourse analysis does not deny the physical world; instead it focuses on what we construct to be real in our physical environment through the action of talk (Willig, 2003; Wood & Kroger, 2000). From this perspective, the object being talked about is secondary to what the talk is doing. Specifically, the main focus is on what people say, how they say it, and to what end it is said. By focusing on talk as action, the reality of the object being discussed can be constructed and understood in the immediate interactional context in which it is being used. The constructed reality in talk is specific to each situation and we cannot appropriately analyze discourse that is divorced from the context in which it was generated (Wood & Kroger, 2000). For example, a woman may aggressively or angrily refer to another woman she does not like as a ‘bitch.’ In this situation, the context in which the word is used and the style or manner in which it is delivered combine to produce an action of dislike that can be threatening. In another situation that same woman may affectionately or jokingly refer to a close friend as a ‘bitch.’ If the women involved have a shared meaning of this word as a demonstration of affection and camaraderie, the use of the word ‘bitch’ and the style in which it is delivered can perform an action of endearment. As well, the researcher does not use imagination to creatively construct an abstract meaning for the participant’s discourse. Specific to my research, my interpretation of the sense women make of their position on the topic of female genitals will be constructed within the particular conversational and political context of the transcripts of the dyad conversational sessions.

Further, instead of striving to eliminate variability in the data, a discourse analyst recognizes and gives it a voice (Billig, 1991; Billig et al, 1988; Willig, 2003; Wood & Kroger, 2000). Different versions of reality can be constructed in discourse, and the discourse can serve multiple functions within that reality. Variability is important

because it emphasizes the action orientation of talk and is often an indicator of contradictions and discursive dilemmas. Emphasis is placed on how the discourse is constructed within a social context to perform specific social actions, and how the social actions interact with ideological practices (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988; Willig, 2003). In particular, ideological dilemmas can be constructed within the rhetorical organization of talk when people talk about events, objects, and themselves in multiple and often contradictory ways using different interpretative repertoires. Variability is expected both between and within individuals, and the variability and consistency in the variety of discursive components in accounts assist the analyst to identify the pattern of interpretative repertoires being drawn on by the participants.

Finally, discursive researchers take nothing for granted and question everything, including their own categories, assumptions, and personal biases (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 2000). The researcher must constantly ask, “Why am I reading this passage this way? What features produce this reading?” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 168).

CHAPTER FIVE – METHOD

5.1 Dyad Focus Groups

Put simply, a focus group is a conversation among a selected group of two or more individuals regarding a specific topic (Wilkinson, 1999). Focus groups are an ideal context for individuals to: (a) explore their differing beliefs, experiences, desires, and concerns (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999); (b) construct a “collective sense” (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 228), (c) “rehearse the taken for granted” (Seymour-Smith et al., 2002, p. 265); and (d) construct and negotiate positions within the discourse (Seymour-Smith et al., 2002).

Choosing the focus group method for data generation must involve consideration of the epistemological and theoretical perspectives of the research (Wilkinson, 1999). Since Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) version of social constructionism views the researcher as more of an outsider with regard to data analysis, it is appropriate to label the conversational sessions as dyads, instead of triads, within the context of my research. Relative to the context of a focus group, it is important to note that the dyad sessions are not neutral interactions (Pajari, Jallinoja, & Absetz, 2006). Rather, they are performative and interpretative situations that are loaded with values, beliefs, and expectations. The people who choose to participate in this type of social interaction have an interest in the topic and they will often construct a personal agenda for their position in this context before attending the session. As well, the nature of the research questions invites certain kinds of responses and guides the tone of the discourse.

The lack of neutrality can be troublesome for objectivist research, but offers constructionist research an ideal situation to view participants as active agents who make choices and use discursive strategies to position themselves within this political context (Eves, 2004; Pajari et al., 2006; Seymour-Smith et al., 2002). Further, the lengthy (i.e., two to three hours), interactive nature of this discursive context offers an opportunity to study how and to what ends people construct multiple and often opposing ways of speaking about themselves (e.g., ideological dilemmas). The discourse, positions, and dilemmas that are constructed are viewed as active achievements of the participants in this context and are analysed from that perspective (Eves, 2004).

5.2 Sample Size

Quantitative research usually has large sample sizes because the units of analysis are the participants (Hatfield, 2000). In contrast, the units of analysis for discursive research are the texts or parts of texts provided by the participants. Since focus groups often last two to three hours, even a few participants have the potential to generate a large number of relevant discourse units for analysis. Therefore, smaller sample sizes are usually sufficient to explore the consistency and variability in talk regarding the discursive phenomenon being studied. The primary goal of the research is to *intensively* rather than *extensively* explore a topic (Seymour-Smith et al., 2002).

Further, some feminist researchers (Farquhar & Das, 1999; Kitzinger & Farquhar, 1999) suggest that small focus groups are highly suitable for sensitive topics, and this method is known to facilitate, rather than impede discussion. As well, research suggests that people are more likely to share sensitive personal experiences in a small focus group of strangers rather than in a larger group (Morgan & Krueger, as cited in Farquhar & Das, 1999).

5.3 Participants

Originally I intended to use an opportunistic sample (i.e., women who had participated, and volunteered to participate, in my previous female genital research). This encompassed a possible sample of 27 women (17 who had previously participated and 10 additional non-participating volunteers). However, I underestimated the out-migration from this small metropolitan area. Twenty-one of the women I emailed responded and expressed an interest in participating in this new research, but 15 of them no longer lived in the province. Of the remaining six, only two women were able to find a convenient time to participate that matched another participant. Therefore, an additional six women were recruited (via information posters that described the research, see Appendix A) from the university and the general metropolitan area. Consequently, my sample of eight women was obtained primarily through convenience sampling. The only criterion for participation in the present research was that the women must have been 18 years of age or older at the time of participation.

Convenience sampling is often maligned because it is considered to produce unrepresentative samples (Neuman, 2000). However, this form of sampling can be appropriate if the research is designed to advance our understanding of a specific issue, and the results are not generalized (Del Balso & Lewis, 1997). Since the goal of this research was to understand women's constructed subject positions when talking about female genitals within the discursive context of the research interaction, and I do not generalize my findings to women as a group, convenience sampling was appropriate for this research.

The eight English-speaking participants were between the ages of 20 and 36 years ($M = 25.88$ years) at the time of data collection, and each woman participated only

once. Although I welcomed ethnic diversity in the sample, seven of the women self-identified as Caucasian, with only one woman self-identifying as “mixed – White Middle Eastern”. Four of the women reported being in a committed relationship (i.e., married or exclusively dating), and the other four women reported being single. All women had some level of post-secondary education, with five currently attending university and other three employed in various professional careers (i.e., teacher, youth care worker, and sales associate). With regard to the demographic information pertaining to the women’s familiarity with visually examining their genitals, seven of the eight women reported having visually examined their genitals on more than one occasion. As well, all the women reported discussing female genital information with other people (i.e., with one or more of the following: friends, daughter, mother, sisters, female relatives, cousins, and husband). When asked how often they discussed female genitals with other people, the responses were “rarely” (two women), “once a week” (two women), “a few times a month” (one woman), “a few times a year” (two women) and “not sure” (one woman).

The women were divided into four dyad groups. Two of the dyads consisted of a participant from my previous research and a woman newly recruited. The other two dyads contained two newly recruited participants. All four dyads consisted of women who were not familiar with each other, and I had previously met only three of the participants. My reasoning behind not having the participants acquainted with each other is that often the best practice for discussing sensitive topics, which are not normally discussed in daily conversation, is in small groups of strangers (Farquhar & Das, 1999; Kitinger & Barbour, 1999; Kitinger & Farquhar, 1999). This way the

participants would not have *previously* established norms of ‘appropriate’ conversation or group hierarchies with regard to leadership of the group in conversation.

To demonstrate my appreciation for the participants’ time and willingness to contribute to this research I provided beverages and snacks for the groups. As well, participants received a thank you card containing a \$10 gift certificate for McNally Robinson Bookstore and a carnation from a local flower shop. The remunerations were given to each participant regardless of the amount of her contribution to the research.

5.4 Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of Saskatchewan prior to data generation. I facilitated all the dyad groups. The participants for each dyad met me at an agreed upon time in a small meeting room provided by the Department of Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan. Each woman was given a wrapped carnation, a thank you card containing a \$10 gift certificate from McNally Robinson Bookstore, a pen, two copies of the consent form (see Appendix B), a demographic sheet with a blank cover sheet as an added measure of confidentiality (see Appendix C), a copy of the general topics for discussion (see Appendix D), a debriefing sheet (see Appendix E), and a large envelope.

After introductions the women were invited to help themselves to the beverages and snacks provided. Once everyone was settled I explained the nature of the research, specifically, that I was interested in hearing about the women’s thoughts, feelings, practices, and societal influences with regard to female genitals. The participants were then asked to read and sign the consent forms, paying particular attention to the sections that outline that: (a) the research is strictly voluntary and they may refuse to contribute to the conversation, or withdraw at anytime without penalty and/or consequence, and

they will still receive the aforementioned remunerations; (b) focus group research has limits that do not allow me to guarantee completely the confidentiality of the information shared in the groups; and (c) the focus group sessions will be audio-recorded and I will be taking notes during the sessions. After the participants read the consent form, any concerns and/or questions were addressed before they were asked to sign both copies (one for their records and one for mine). I encouraged the women to ask questions at any time during the session if they were unsure of anything. The women completed the demographic forms and put them in the envelope that was provided. They were asked to review the discussion topics and any questions were answered. The women gave their permission before the tape recorder was turned on, with the understanding that I would turn it off at any time if that was someone's wish.

The dyad focus groups were between two and three hours in length. Upon completion of the dyad sessions, the participants were thanked for their contributions and were given the opportunity to put their names on a list if they were interested in receiving a brief report outlining the results of the research. The sessions were transcribed verbatim by me, and I wrote a comprehensive summary of the information that was generated in each session. The summaries for each session were emailed to the women who participated in that session to obtain their input and approval on my interpretation of the information generated. The participants were assured that they could add and/or delete any information they chose. All of the participants approved the summaries without any changes. Although I used direct quotes from the transcripts in data analysis, transcript release forms were not needed as the confidentiality of each participant in the transcripts was assured through the use of pseudonyms. Further, no personally identifying information about the participants is disclosed in my thesis.

Since there was a possibility that discussion of this topic may trigger unpleasant memories or psychological stress, each participant was given a debriefing sheet. The debriefing sheet listed the phone numbers and addresses of Mental Health Services, Mobile Crisis Unit, Sexual Assault Crisis Line, Student Counselling Services, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Ally Centre should anyone need to talk to someone regarding concerns raised from involvement in this research.

5.5 Data Analysis Strategy

The first step in data analysis was reading and rereading all the verbatim transcripts to reacquaint and familiarize myself with the discourse. As well, I used audit trails and memos to provide an account of what I was thinking and doing while analysing the data. These readings, audit trails and memos enabled me to discern the patterns in the information the women recurrently used when discussing female genitals (i.e., interpretative repertoires), and focus on the construction of subject positions the women engaged in during the course of the sessions. Particular focus was placed on the variability and consistency between and within the discursive accounts constructed by the women in the immediate interactional context of the dyad sessions. This focus provided a means of identifying the discursive strategies and rhetorical organization the women used when dealing with competing and often contradictory discourses (i.e., ideological dilemmas) associated with female genitals. Further, my analysis treated the talk as actions, thereby examining the ways the women performed actions with their discourse (e.g., aligning with and differentiating from the other woman in the dyad, persuasion, justification). Put simply, I analysed what the women said, how they said it, and some of the possible ends to which the talk was used within the dyad conversational sessions. As well, I engaged in self-reflexivity as I was analysing the data (i.e.,

continually asked myself why I was reading a passage a certain way and what components of the passage produced that reading) to ensure some distance was maintained between the data and my own personal constructions on this topic.

5.6 Research Rigour

Rigour in qualitative research is the means by which qualitative researchers demonstrate integrity and competence, thereby affording legitimacy to the research process (Tobin & Begley, 2004). This process is similar to validity and reliability in quantitative research. The absence of rigour in qualitative research presents the danger of the research being considered too subjective. One form of rigour is goodness. This construct is an essential and embedded element of the research procedure because it is a way of establishing “situatedness, trustworthiness and authenticity” (p. 391). Therefore, the goodness of the research must not be limited to discussion of methodology; instead it must be reflected by the research as a whole. Specifically, it must be reflected in the epistemology, theory, methodology, method, representation of the participants’ and researcher’s voice, interpretation and presentation of the data, and recommendations for future research.

Applying goodness to the present research, I used social constructionist criteria (i.e., positions are constructed through social interactions; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to construct an understanding of how and some of the possible ends to which participants used socially available resources (i.e., interpretative repertoires) to construct and negotiate subject positions and ideological practices within the context of this research project. My research results are not generalizable to other social contexts or women in general. Further, goodness is an overarching principle, and an integral component embedded in my research process (Tobin & Begley, 2004). It has been developed

through adherence to the assumptions of: (a) constructionism, feminist discursive theory, and critical discursive theory; (b) grounding the study's logic and criteria in discourse analysis; (c) representing both the participants' and my voice in the analyses; (d) presentation of the new insights learned in this research; and (e) suggestions for future research.

With regard to the trustworthiness of the research, criteria for credibility, dependability, confirmability, and educative authenticity were followed (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Specifically, credibility (i.e., the 'fit' between participants' discursive constructions of their positions and my representation of their subject positions) has been established through consultation with my thesis supervisor and committee; providing participants with, and getting their approval of, my comprehensive summary of the dyad session they participated in; peer debriefing during graduate research seminars; and persistent use of audit trails and memos. Dependability has been achieved by being responsible and ensuring that the process of my research is "logical, traceable, and clearly documented" (Schwandt, 2001 as cited in Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 392). Confirmability has been established by using direct quotes from the data to demonstrate that my representations of the constructions and negotiations of subject positions are grounded in the data and not a reflection of my personal biases (Tobin & Begley, 2004). As well, direct quotes provide the participants' position on the topic. Finally, educative authenticity (i.e., helping people to "appreciate the viewpoints and constructions of others;" Guba & Lincoln, 1994 as cited in Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 392) was demonstrated by showing the variability of the women's subject positions in their talk about female genitals in the dyad focus groups.

CHAPTER SIX – ANALYSIS OF DYAD GROUPS

6.1 Powerful and Powerless: The Construction of Opposing Interpretative Repertoires

The second aim in my research was to search the data for recurrent patterns (e.g., metaphors, themes) that indicated shared components in the participants' accounts of female genitals (i.e., interpretative repertoires; Edley & Wetherell, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), and compare them to those identified in my brief review of the available textual resources. The pervasive patterns in the participants' accounts were summarized and identified at a relatively global level, yet some insight is provided as to how the participants used the repertoires to assist with subject positioning (a more in-depth analysis on subject positioning is provided later in this chapter).

The most pervasive pattern in the participants' talk was the presence of two opposing interpretative repertoires of female genitals: powerful female genital repertoire and powerless female genital repertoire. The powerful repertoire was described by all the participants, at some point in their conversational session, using either a metaphor (i.e., female genitals are "powerful, you know, the centre of-of female identity" – Beth, dyad 1), or clusters of terms that were themed under the powerful female genital repertoire (e.g., "*Vagina Monologues*...I think it's really positive teaching that it's your body. It's your choice. You're the one that controls it" – Fran, dyad 3; "My clitoris is what is sexual...that is where my pleasure comes from" – Gina, dyad 4).

Beyond summarizing the powerful repertoire, participants constructed three key descriptive elements. First, the powerful repertoire was an argument constructed to demonstrate how the powerfulness of female genitals was in opposition to the powerlessness of female genitals. Excerpts 1 and 2 provide an illustration of this element (see Appendix F for a brief note on transcription notation).

Excerpt 1 (dyad 1):

BETH: Powerful, you know, the centre of-of female identity [...] personal identity [...] for me...it's a sacred place...and it's, um...I think things like pornography and other things tend to-to devalue that. I mean, it's just a hole...you know, it becomes...an orifice to be filled...you know.

Even though Beth initially explicitly identifies female genitals as powerful, she emphasizes that what follows that statement is her point of view (“for me”; Quinn & Radtke, 2006), or a personal position that is subject to refutation. This qualification to her firm position within the powerful repertoire allows her to set up an argument that can be seen more as an alternative rather than a strong position. Her argument, even though somewhat weakened by her frequent use of “you know” (which can serve to make her argument less likely to be challenged because it offers an invitation to the other participant to empathize with her position, instead of making a firm stance on the topic), allows her to equate female genitals to a “sacred place” that can be devalued by a media source (e.g., “pornography”) she constructs as portraying female genitals as powerless (“just a hole [...] an orifice to be filled”).

Excerpt 2 (dyad 3):

FRAN: Any possible leakage and you need to cover it up and it doesn't exist

and don't let other people know it exists. Yeah, and if you are-aren't menstruating and you're going to have sex with someone you need to douche to make your vagina feel pretty. You need to smell like an apple orchard for them. I'm like, NO, actually I need to smell like a pussy for them.

The main difference between Fran's and Beth's argument for the opposition of powerfulness and powerlessness of female genitals is that Fran begins her argument by presenting an example of the suppression that contributes to the powerlessness of female genitals ("Any possible leakage and you need to cover it up and it doesn't exist" and "you need to douche to make your vagina feel pretty"). This is followed by a direct firm contradiction to the powerlessness illustrated in her example ("NO") and a signifier ("actually") that her powerful position ("I need to smell like a pussy for them") is in opposition to this example of a powerless position. Further, these features in her talk suggest that Fran is mocking this situation to make her argument more rhetorically effective.

The second key element of this repertoire was the discursive rhetorical construction of the importance of female genitals being accepted and valued by society (as illustrated by the following excerpt of dialogue):

Excerpt 3 (dyad 1):

BETH: *Good for Her* is a place in Toronto. Beautiful women's store. Women only. There are specific times when men can come, but they offer...tremendous...like you're vagina eco-system is one of them and all these wonderful workshops that just get you acquainted with yourself...there's an awareness. There is something emerging where

people are saying there needs to be a place for women's sexuality, women's sensibilities, and that has something to do with again accepting and legitimizing your genitals. There's a place for me, you know, because before sex stores were for men.

ANGIE: A woman can't really be complete until she is valued, until she values herself, as well as society as a whole valuing that aspect of a woman. It's not whole.

Beth begins her argument by offering an example of a social resource available to women ("*Good for Her* is a place in Toronto. Beautiful women's store") promoting the powerfulness of female genitals ("wonderful workshops that just get you acquainted with yourself"). Even though Beth weakens the example somewhat when she goes from "Women only" to "men can come," she qualifies this by saying that men can only access this resource at "specific times." The use of this qualifier reasserts the powerfulness of this resource for women. Further, Beth uses this example to support her argument that a new "awareness" is "emerging," whereby society is beginning to accept and allow ("legitimize") women's interest in their genitals (i.e., a progressive view of history; Edley & Wetherell, 2001). She couples this statement with an assertion that this symbol of powerful female genitals relates to her current powerful position ("There's a place for me"), in comparison to (signified by the use of "because") past, undesirable social ideologies regarding access to sexuality resources ("before sex stores were for men").

Angie builds on Beth's argument for the societal trend toward accepting female genitals to include the importance of women and society valuing female genitals. However, not only does Angie build on Beth's argument, she takes a firm position on the point. That is, with the use of an intensifier (e.g., "really") Angie offers an extreme

case formulation (i.e., an overstatement or exaggeration intended to make the account more rhetorically effective; Edley & Wetherell, 1999) that a woman is not “complete” and society is “not whole” until female genitals are valued.

The final key element of the powerful repertoire was the discursive construction that powerful female genitals are a positive goal for women to aspire to. However, the construction of powerfulness is dependent on the social milieu, women valuing their genitals, and women being active and responsible for how their genitals are constructed. Excerpts 4 and 5 illustrate this concept:

Excerpt 4 (dyad 4):

HELEN: You get to high school and you-you don't REALLY talk about it that much, but...um, definitely even in this past year I've become WAY more with it and I think it's because of the relationship that I'm in right now. Um...it's very good and-and, ah, and now I DEFINITELY have way more respect for it...for female genitals than I ever have before, just because-because of the way that it's been suppressed for my whole life. It's good though now. I LOVE IT!

Similar to Angie, Helen uses intensifiers to signify an extreme case formulation (Edley & Wetherell, 1999) that constructs a comparison with temporal markers (Edley & Wetherell, 2001) between her old powerless position (“You get to high school and you-you don't REALLY talk about it that much”) and her new, favoured powerful position (“definitely even in this past year I've become WAY more with it”). Further, during the last part of this excerpt, Helen emphasizes again the distinction (signified by the use of “because”) between her current powerful position and her previous powerless position. This emphatic comparison between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ subject positions allows Helen to

argue that a powerful position is a positive goal she is working towards, yet she does not take full ownership of this progression. Instead, she uses vague language (i.e., “I think”) to offer a possible explanation for the change in her position (“it’s because of the relationship that I’m in right now”). Hence, Helen firmly proclaims that she values her genitals; however, her aspirations toward a powerful position have been influenced by a change in her social milieu.

Excerpt 5 (dyad 4):

GINA: Vagina workshops where women would sit around and look at their vaginas and, you know, and re-discover their vaginas...that’s so amazing and I think also what’s come out from the *Vagina Monologues*, which has been an INCREDIBLY positive thing for women’s vaginas, is...um, this wonderful realization that we secretly all want to talk, look, think about our vaginas.

Gina expands on the influential nature of the social situation by moving beyond a personal account (like Helen’s) to encompass women in society who have experienced “vagina workshops” and the “*Vagina Monologues*.” Again the use of an extreme case formulation (“INCREDIBLY positive thing”; Edley & Wetherell, 1999) is intended to make Gina’s argument (i.e., “we secretly all want to talk, look, think about our vaginas”) more rhetorically effective. However, Gina’s argument for powerful genitals is tempered by using the word “secretly.” This implies that, although powerful genital position is a positive goal, it is not fully accepted within the current social milieu.

Contrasting with the powerful female genital repertoire is the powerless repertoire. Similar to the powerful repertoire, this repertoire was used by all the participants at some point in their conversational session. However, the powerless

repertoire was constructed from a larger array of pervasive themes (i.e., female genitals are abused, violated, dominated, oppressed, suppressed and predominantly socially unacceptable and invisible in Western society) intended to support the argument that women face external barriers that hinder respect, consideration and equality for female genitals.

Although there are many examples in the research transcripts to illustrate the themes in this repertoire, only a select few will be offered and discussed.

Excerpt 6 (dyad 4):

Gina: Pornography, I see as VERY male-fantasy focused. It's about having...um, like...two guys trying to ram me at the same time with masks over their faces, pretending that they're ROBBERS. That to me is a RAPE."

Gina presents an extreme case scenario (Edley & Wetherell, 1999), emphasized by the phrase "VERY male-fantasy focused," to construct an argument that some media sources (e.g., pornography) promote the abuse, violation, domination, and oppression of female genitals. The use of the first person in presenting this argument serves to directly point to her as being influenced by this construction of female genitals.

Excerpt 7 (dyad 2):

DONNA: In the education systems...yeah, I don't even remember them showing us pictures of female genitals. They certainly showed us pictures of guys...like the diagrams, they didn't show us pictures, but they didn't show...I don't remember seeing diagrams of females...I guess it just reinforces that it's not something that you're really supposed to discuss...they're not even showing it to you in an

educational context. It must not be something that you're supposed to talk about.

Donna's excerpt is representative of all the participants' primary and secondary public education experiences, and offers an argument that female genitals were suppressed, and constructed as socially unacceptable and invisible in a Canadian public institution (e.g., some school systems). Even though she qualifies her argument (regarding the absence of references to female genitals) by referring to her reliance on memory, she uses an emphatic assertion ("certainly"; Quinn & Radtke, 2006) that information about male genitals was available. However, she expresses uncertainty ("I guess"), then backs down her argument (with the use of the word "just") before offering justification for why women may be hesitant to discuss female genitals in public ("reinforces that it's not something that you're really supposed to discuss"). Although hesitant, Donna does construct an argument that this public resource is a barrier that hinders respect, consideration and equality for female genitals.

Finally, the following excerpt is provided as a more explicit example of an external barrier a woman may face when trying to construct a powerful position for her genitals:

Excerpt 7 (dyad 2):

CATHY: My one friend told me how she had...um, slept with-with this-this guy and then, she had, you know, and then someone had recommended to her that she get tested for...STI's and things like that. So she had all the whole battery of tests and then...six months later...she went back to get this re-test, right, and the doctor started to YELL at her...and say, like, 'oh, you just HAD these tests, and we don't

usually do this that often, you know, unless people are like, you know, PROSTITUTES...are you like a STREET GIRL, or what are you?' She's like, 'well, I had them and then I, you know, you're supposed to have them again just to ensure that, you know, if something develops when it's a year later, or something.' And the guy is like, 'NO, like we're not doing these again, like what ARE YOU DOING?' And that just made her feel REALLY, you know, TERRIBLE about, you know.

The first thing to note about this example is that Cathy uses footing (i.e., making claims by reporting what others have said; Goffman, 1981 as cited in Wood & Kroger, 2000) and reported speech (i.e., quoting exact words initially spoken by another person; Wood & Kroger, 2000) as a means of staging her argument. This can serve to give her the opportunity to present information to support the argument for the powerlessness of female genitals, while distancing her from the reported events. Further support for Cathy wanting to distance herself from her account can be found in her hesitant language (e.g., repetition of words and use of vague phrases such as "STI's and things like that"). This linguistic strategy can indicate sensitivity to discussing the topic (Quinn & Radtke, 2006).

Relevant to the content of her account, Cathy uses an extreme scenario (Edley & Wetherell, 1999) to make her account of the powerlessness of female genitals more rhetorically effective. In particular, Cathy reconstructs the situation where her friend experiences a barrier (i.e., a physician) to valuing and actively taking responsibility for her genitals. Cathy's account relies heavily on emphasizing words in phrases that construct this situation as fraught with disrespect and inconsideration for this friend's

genitals (e.g., “the doctor started to YELL at her,” “are you like a STREET GIRL, or what are you?” and “NO, like we’re not doing these again, like what ARE YOU DOING?”). Cathy ends her account by emphasizing the impact of this situation on her friend, “And that just made her feel REALLY, you know, TERRIBLE about, you know.” The use of this example of a powerless genital situation supports Cathy’s argument for the powerlessness of female genitals in society by drawing on a situation where a powerless position was constructed, via influence from a social resource promoting powerlessness (e.g., the medical industry). Further, Cathy’s use of “you know” (Quinn & Radtke, 2006) can serve as an invitation to Donna and me to empathise with this situation, thereby validating this component of the powerless genital repertoire.

6.1.1 Linking Analyses

Consistent with the analysis of the textual information pertaining to female genitals that I reviewed, my initial analysis of the dyad focus group transcripts resulted in the identification of two opposing interpretative repertoires: powerful and powerless. These opposing interpretative repertoires were used repeatedly by this sample of women, with the women drawing on various resources (e.g., media, experiences with the formal education system and the medical industry, family, friends) as the building blocks for their conversations. Further, the identified interpretative repertoires were components of the talk for all the women, and allowed them to orient themselves in accordance with the social function of the discourse (e.g., persuasion, justification, alignment, opposition) for the moment that it was needed. Finally, all of the sources of information contained in my brief summary of the textual resources were used, by the participants, as evidence to support their arguments when constructing and negotiating subject positions.

6.2 Subject Positioning on the Topic of Female Genitals

The third aim of my research was to focus on the consistency and variability of the subject positions in the participants' talk about their genitals. This analysis began with identifying and interpreting the initial subject position of each participant. The first question I asked the women in each dyad session was "What comes to mind when you think of female genitals?" This open-ended question provided an opportunity for each woman to discursively orient herself on this subject, via the way she chose to initiate her talk about the topic. For example, women initially drew on the powerful female genital repertoire used such discursive strategies as: (a) directly referring to the power of female genitals (e.g., Beth – dyad 1: "I think of POWER!...I just think it is such a powerful, you know, the centre of-of female identity"); (b) presenting a familiarity and comfort with the topic (e.g., Donna – dyad 2: "We talk about it in my family...so it's not like you just think of one thing"); (c) aligning with a socially available resource that promotes that construction of female genitals as powerful (e.g., Eve – dyad 3: "I went to see the *Vagina Monologues* with a friend of mine"); or (d) constructing a position of power through talk that displayed knowledge of the topic (e.g., Gina – dyad 4: "Labia, uterus, vagina, clitoris...ovaries...all of it. That to me, the whole thing is genitals. So it's not just what is on the outside for me, it's everything that functions on the inside as well").

In contrast, women initially aligning their talk with a more powerless position on the topic of female genitals used such discursive strategies as: (a) uncertainty as to what her answer to the question revealed about her (e.g., Angie – dyad 1: "I think of sex [...] I don't know what that says about me? But maybe I don't yet value what my genitals has to offer in the whole spectrum of things"); (b) pausing to answer the question and then offering a non-committal answer (e.g., Cathy – dyad 2: "I don't know"); (c) agreeing

with the more powerful answer of the other woman in the session, yet not committing to the answer through further clarification that would clearly indicate a more powerful position (e.g., Fran – dyad 3: “Yeah, I-I think along the same lines”); or (d) offering a justification of her less powerful position by referring to a socially available resource that this woman later identified as being suppressive (Helen – dyad 4: “I-I don’t know, like I always grew up with, like, the whole sex ed thing and that’s how I thought about it for a long time”).

Interestingly, each group had one woman who initially constructed a powerful position on the topic, and the other woman constructed a more powerless position. If the women would have maintained their initial discursive positions on the topic, data analysis would have been straightforward. However, the construction of positions in the women’s talk is not simply a matter of discursively aligning with *either* a powerful position or a powerless position. Rather, the situational demands of the topic of conversation provide the participants with opportunities to construct multiple positions using elements from both interpretative repertoires (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Quinn & Radtke, 2006). Yet, at times during the construction of multiple genital positions the participants used the interpretative repertoires inconsistently. These inconsistencies often constructed ideological dilemmas that the participants needed to discursively manage in order to “reduce the apparent conflict” (Edley & Wetherell, 1999, p. 190). Management of ideological dilemmas involved implementation of a negotiation strategy appropriate for the rhetorical context within which the contrary subject positions were constructed (Willig, 2003). Although all the participants used multiple and opposing ways of talking about the topic during their conversational sessions, only a selection of excerpts will be used to illustrate how and

some of the ends to which the participants engaged in ideological dilemmas and negotiation strategies.

6.2.1 Ideological Dilemma 1: The Role of Society

Excerpt 8 (dyad 1: In response to the question “What comes to mind when you think of female genitals?”):

ANGIE: I think of sex, personally. That’s my first immediate reaction

BETH: I think of POWER!...I just think it is such a powerful, you know, the centre of-of female identity. You know, through...um, anything from-from birth to sexuality to, you know...um, personal identity I guess.

ANGIE: That’s interesting because...um...because I-I agree (*Beth: Uh huh*) but my initial reaction is sex and I don’t know what that says about me? But maybe I don’t yet value what my genitals has to offer in the whole spectrum of things. Maybe I’m too focused on that one sort of aspect...But yeah...definitely.

BETH: I think it’s pretty emphasized in our culture...I think it’s hard to avoid.

ANGIE: YEAH! Yeah, that is an idea.

BETH: That does tend to be...and I...um...I don’t know...I’m getting on in years so I have the...had some time to-to kinda go...uh...and explore that um...where...I guess where I’ve been taken through the culture, through the media, through partners, through...you know...various other things. And well...through birth and I’ve arrived at some

conclusions that are very different from what I might have said...you know...even ten years ago.

ANGIE: Yeah...yeah. That's a valid point.

BETH: Yeah, so I find I'm very powered by (*ANGIE: Yeah*)...you know, my femaleness at this point, and...um...I'm really happy to pass it on to my daughter...you know

Beth was one of the participants in my previous research on female genitals. Therefore, she had the option of drawing on her previous experience when discussing this topic and orienting herself in the conversation. Even though Beth was a 'veteran' of this type of research, and identified with the powerfulness of female genitals, she waited patiently for Angie, who self-identified as a newcomer to this type of research, to begin the conversation after I posed the first question. This may have served as a means for Beth to hear Angie's constructed position on the topic before presenting her own.

Angie's initial response to the question is to associate female genitals to an action (i.e., "sex"), yet her use of "I think" implies that she is uncertain of her answer (Wood & Kroger, 2000). As well, by ending the sentence with "personally" she is emphasizing that this is her point of view, not a direct contradiction to anything that may be said (Quinn & Radtke, 2006). Further, her next sentence emphasizes the uncertainty of her answer because she clarifies that this is her "first immediate reaction." Angie's clarification that her answer is a tentative one ("first), rather than a firm position, and that her response is specific to that moment in time ("immediate reaction"), may serve as a means of trying to buffer her from any criticism Beth may offer.

Beth's response to Angie is to start with the same uncertainty ("I think" and "I just think"), yet she emphasizes that her position extends beyond the physical ("anything

from-from birth to sexuality”) to include a sense of agency (i.e., “POWER,” “powerful,” “centre of-of female identity” and “personal identity”). Beth’s use of an intensifier (i.e., “anything;” Edley & Wetherell, 1999) allows her to emphasize the scope of her powerful position. However, Beth tempers her position somewhat when she ends her turn by saying “I guess.” This may serve as a means of encouraging Angie to continue the conversation.

Angie continues the conversation and initially recognizes Beth’s answer (“I agree”), thereby promoting an acknowledgement from Beth (“Uh hum”). However, Angie continues her point by saying “but,” thereby signalling that what comes next will be in opposition to what was said (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Angie finishes her point by reiterating that her “initial reaction is sex,” yet adds to this by saying that she does not know what that says about her. Angie continues, using “but” again as a means of setting up two possible qualifications to her declaration: “maybe I don’t yet value what my genitals has to offer in the whole spectrum of things. Maybe I’m too focused on that one sort of aspect.” Since neither of these statements was spoken as a question, they can be interpreted as a discursive act of self-denigration. Further, by phrasing these comments as statements rather than questions, we can imply that Angie is offering plausible tentative explanations for her previous comment that her “initial reaction is sex.” Also, the use of the word “yet” indicates that her position is flexible and will probably change. She finishes off her turn by agreeing with her previous points (“yeah”) and ending with an intensifier (e.g., “definitely”) as a means of solidifying her current powerless position.

Beth’s response, “I think it’s pretty emphasized in our culture...I think it’s hard to avoid,” offers Angie justification for her powerless position. Angie immediately and

emphatically supports this justification (“YEAH! Yeah, that is an idea”), which encourages Beth to hesitantly disclose her own previous powerless position on this topic and her personal progression to her current powerful position. Beth does this by vaguely drawing on social resources (e.g., “culture,” “the media,” and “partner”), which she later constructs as some of the symbols of female genital powerlessness, and she emphasizes her powerlessness by saying that she was “taken through” these resources. Then she constructs temporal markers (Edley & Wetherell, 2001) to illustrate her personal progression from an old powerless position (“even ten years ago”) to her current (“at this point”) powerful position (“I’m very powered by...my femaleness”). The use of these temporal marks, combined with her reference to age (“I’m getting on in years”), may serve as a means of legitimizing her position. Beth finishes off by using the intensifier “really” to emphasize the importance of sharing this powerful position with other females (“I’m really happy to pass it on to my daughter”).

This example illustrates both the general multiplicity of subject positions on this topic and the variability in positioning in the immediate situational context of this discussion. Specific to the general multiplicity of subject positions, Beth illustrates that her constructed position on her genitals has been constructed and reconstructed over time, often in response to the influence of specific social resources (e.g., powerful and powerless interpretative repertoires). As well, Angie acknowledges that she has currently constructed a powerless genital position, but she recognizes that this construction will probably change with future interactions.

With regard to the variability in subject positioning on this topic in this excerpt, Angie’s initial discursive position on her genitals is ambiguous (i.e., relating her genitals to the act of sex, which can be associated with dominance and submissiveness).

However, her questioning of this position and her qualification that “maybe I don’t yet value what my genitals has to offer in the whole spectrum of things” constructs a powerless position on the topic at this time. Although Angie maintains her powerless position until the end of this excerpt, Beth’s position demonstrates more situational variability. She begins this excerpt by explicitly stating a powerful position (“I think of POWER!”). However, in response to Angie’s powerless position, Beth weakens the forcefulness of her powerful position on the topic by justifying Angie’s powerless position (“it’s pretty emphasized in our culture....I think it’s hard to avoid”). Beth’s discursive action of shifting her position may serve to minimize the distance between her powerful position and Angie’s powerless position, and keep the conversation going, but it also constructs an inconsistency in her subject positioning (i.e., an ideological dilemma). To manage this constructed conflict in her position, Beth provides a personal example of how her position was previously influenced by social resources (e.g., “culture,” “the media,” and “partner”), but that age and experience has assisted her in constructing her now powerful position.

To further illustrate the construction of multiple and opposing subject positions Excerpts 9, 10 and 11 will be analyzed and interpreted:

Excerpt 9 (dyad 3):

FRAN: I do shave my pubic hair because I like the aesthetics of it better [...]
When it comes to pubic hair I really think that it’s a personal choice. Either which way, I really don’t care what other people do with their pubic hair. I do it the way that I like it. It’s-it’s for me and if my boyfriend objects, TOO BAD!

By using the intensifier “really” twice in this excerpt, and emphatically stating that she does not “care what other people do,” Fran takes responsibility for her genitals (even if her boyfriend objects) and constructs a firm position for the powerfulness of female genitals. Despite her firm position on the topic at this point in the discussion, Fran qualifies her position in the next excerpt from a short time later.

Excerpt 10 (dyad 3):

FRAN: I think a lot of the things that are happening in society, and not just dealing with female genitals, but they are also definitely a part of that, is saying that you need to change who you are [...] You need to wax to be more attractive to your partner [...] I think a lot of society is saying just change who you are, you need to fit into the box, you can't be you anymore. Which is sad.

Switching from first person singular (“I”) to discussing herself from the viewpoint of another person (“you”) on two occasions in this excerpt allows Fran to discuss society’s influence on the construction of powerlessness of female genitals from a more distant position (Wood & Kroger, 2000). However, this proximal shift in her position weakens her previous powerful position because she is no longer aligning with a powerful position. If Fran still had a firm position on the topic she would have explicitly stated that she did not agree with this powerless position. Instead, she uses the distant viewpoint to offer justification (i.e., “things that are happening in society”) for the weakening of her powerful position.

Shortly after Excerpt 10, Fran draws on another example of women shaving their pubic hair to further justify variability in her previous powerful position.

Excerpt 11 (dyad 3):

FRAN: It seems like a lot of people think that a woman who doesn't shave or trim or anything is a woman who doesn't care about herself. And at the same time, a lot of people perceive a woman who shaves, especially if she shaves everything, as a HUGE SLUT! Because she's willing to, like, um...I don't know, make her genitals more accessible or something. And it's just...we get a lot of conflicting stories and-and, um, perceptions of women and the genitals and I think it's very confusing sometimes.

By setting up this example to illustrate two constructed extremes of how women present their genitals (i.e., “a woman who doesn't care about herself” and “a HUGE SLUT”), Fran provides additional support for the construction of powerless female genitals in society, and justification for the variability in her subject positioning (in Excerpt 10). Essentially, she presents a no win (‘damned if you do – damned if you don't’) situation constructed by society to provide justification for the shift in forcefulness of her powerful position. As well, Excerpt 11 sets Fran up to shift back to a powerful position because the extreme example she uses cannot apply to her. That is, since Fran said in Excerpt 9 “I do shave my pubic hair,” and later clarifies that waxing off all of her pubic hair is “not something that I would ever choose to do” (in a discussion between Excerpts 10 and 11), she excludes herself from the extreme case scenario, thereby distancing herself from the powerlessness of female genitals. Fran's full shift back to a powerful female genital position occurs a few minutes after Excerpt 11 when she presents another extreme case scenario (i.e., one girl she knew in school was nicknamed by “everyone as blowjob Mary because she was...willing to give head to all her boyfriends but she

would never let them get into her pants.” This scenario was compared to a story of another girl who did not shower one day before having oral sex with her boyfriend and he told other people that she smelled. Consequently, “somebody emailed the whole school describing her odour and they named her fishy...It’s like, you don’t respect a person for deciding to keep their virginity for a while and yet you can’t respect a person for being a sexual being either”). The difference between this example and Excerpt 11 is that after presenting this second extreme case scenario Fran constructs a firm powerful position by emphatically saying “that doesn’t make ANY sense to me!”

6.2.2 Negotiation Strategy 1: Blaming Society

The excerpts discussed in the previous section highlight how both Beth and Fran discursively construct multiple and opposing positions when discussing female genitals. In these examples, both women use a specific negotiation strategy that allows them to manage the constructed conflict in their subject positions, and return to their previous powerful position. Specifically, they both blame societal influences for the ideological dilemma, thereby justifying their position shift and absolving them of responsibility for the multiplicity and contradiction in their position on the topic.

The use of this negotiation strategy is pervasive in the transcripts. In each dyad one woman would use this strategy to manage an ideological dilemma, and return to either a powerful or powerless position, and shortly afterwards the other woman would blame society for her inconsistency in subject positioning. This negotiation strategy relies heavily on the use of phrases such as “it’s a societal standard,” “it’s pervasive in society,” “it’s so rooted,” “society [...] saying that you need to change who you are,” and “you can’t blame women because it’s everywhere.” Use of this negotiation strategy allows the participants to draw on both the powerful and powerless interpretative

repertoires when they talk about themselves. The flexibility in subject positioning this strategy offers, affords the participants the opportunity to suit their ways of talking about female genitals to meet the rhetorical needs of the immediate discursive situation.

6.2.3 Ideological Dilemma 2: Situational Context

The excerpts in this subsection of subject positions in women's talk about female genitals illustrates the management of ideological dilemmas using the second negotiation strategy identified in the transcripts (i.e., 'it depends on the situation'). To set up the conversational context prior to Excerpt 12, Eve and Fran were discussing what comes to mind when they think of female genitals and how they feel about their genitals. Eve immediately aligns herself with a symbol of powerfulness of female genitals (i.e., "*Vagina Monologues*"), but then qualifies her position by saying "It definitely depends on-on what you're relating them [female genitals] to." Excerpts 12, 13 and 14 illustrate how her position shifts from powerful to powerless, and how she negotiates the ideological dilemma she constructs.

Excerpt 12 (dyad 3):

EVE: Um...if it [pubic hair] is too long, I kind of feel disgusted by it.
Um...but I guess that's the only emotion that I would have. I don't know. And I'm kind of disgusted when people, like completely hairless. Um...for me, that REALLY brings up images of pedophilia, and it...I think it's disgusting. So, too long is gross, too short is gross.

Eve's hesitant start ("Um") to her dialogue and her subsequent use of this linguistic stalling device suggests that this is a potentially sensitive topic for her (Quinn & Radtke, 2006). As well, the use of vague language, such as "I kind of feel," "I guess," "I don't know," and "I'm kind of disgusted" signifies a shift to aligning more with the

powerless interpretative repertoire. However, her position shifts back to drawing on the powerful interpretative repertoire when she emphasizes the intensifier “REALLY,” and constructs an extreme example of powerlessness (“images of pedophilia”) to defend her powerful position and add strength to her argument. She concludes her turn by summarizing (“So”) her now firm position, “too long is gross, too short is gross.”

In response to Eve’s powerful position on pubic hair, Fran states that she shaves and that she constructs it as “a personal choice.” The forcefulness of Fran’s position on this particular aspect of female genitals influences Eve’s position (as illustrated in Excerpt 13).

Excerpt 13 (dyad 3):

EVE: I do feel guilty for feeling, you know, SO disgusted by certain aspects of it. I know I shouldn’t feel guilty, and there’s no reason to feel guilty or disgusted, so I feel guilty for feeling disgusted. You know.

Eve’s use of the word “feel” allows her to distance herself somewhat from her previous comments (Wood & Rennie, 1994) by implying that only “certain aspects” of her subject position are involved in this challenged position. She follows this by challenging herself on this powerless position (“I know I shouldn’t feel guilty, and there’s no reason to feel guilty or disgusted”), then offering a concession and being apologetic for her position (“so I feel guilty for feeling disgusted”), and ending with “You know” as an invitation for Fran to empathize, rather than question her position (Quinn & Radtke, 2006).

Instead of empathizing, Fran stays firm in her powerful position during this particular point in the discussion and further challenges Eve by saying “I don’t know. I feel very normal about it.” Fran solidifies her firm position by offering the extreme case

formulation (Edley & Wetherell, 1999), indicated by the use of the intensifiers “only” and “really,” in her comment “The only thing that really bothers me is when people try and like pass judgment over how somebody else deals with their genitals, like shaving, you know.”

Even though Fran offers Eve the chance to empathize with her position (indicated when she concludes with “you know”), Eve does not immediately respond. Consequently, silence ensues for ten seconds before Eve continues to justify the previous shift in her position (i.e., from an initial powerful position to a powerless position within the conversation regarding pubic hair).

Excerpt 14 (dyad 3):

EVE: I know where the guilt comes from, but...I don't know where the YUCKY feelings come from, you know. I-I feel the guilt, because I KNOW that from being open with everybody around me and from talking all these classes [women's studies], I know it's OKAY that everybody has these things, but...I don't know where mine comes from.

Justification of the shift in her position begins when she distinguishes between (by using “because”) her powerless position on this particular topic in their conversation (“I don't know where the YUCKY feelings come from”), and her constructed powerful subject position (“I KNOW that from being open with everybody around me and from talking all these classes [women's studies], I know it's OKAY that everybody has these things”). Eve further emphasizes this distinction between positions by saying “but” (indicating what comes next is in opposition to the previous comment; Wood & Kroger, 2000) “I don't know where mine comes from.” This statement, along with another

qualifier “Yeah, but I mean that I don’t feel disgusted by it all the time, by my genitals. I’m generally pretty comfortable with them,” allows Eve to manage her ideological dilemma, and shift back to a powerful position, by constructing the contradiction in her position as contingent on the specific topic of pubic hair.

Excerpt 15 illustrates further how an ideological dilemma can be constructed within a specific conversational context.

Excerpt 15 (dyad 4):

GINA: I know that even me, who is very comfortable with my genitalia, won’t go out anymore. I won’t go swimming because I refuse to shave. I find it unbelievably uncomfortable.

HELEN: But that shouldn’t stop you. I work at a pool, I’m a lifeguard, and I see that all the time, and I-I do see women coming in and it’s hair everywhere. And I’m perfectly fine with that. I see the hairy armpits and I’m like (*GINA: Good for them!*), and I work with people who are like, “Oh, that’s disgusting!” And I’m like, “how’s that disgusting?” (*GINA: Yeah.*) “You have it too, you just choose to-to remove it (*GINA: Yeah*) because you feel like you have to.”

GINA: Yeah. Yeah. No, I ah...I don’t know, it’s that thing. But that really troubles me that young girls feel this way.

Both at the beginning of the dyad session and predominantly throughout this conversational session, Gina constructs and firmly maintains a powerful position on the topic of female genitals. However, her position on the specific situational context of pubic hair and swimming weakens her powerful position. In particular, Gina begins this excerpt emphasizing her powerful position (being “very comfortable” with her genitals),

before weakening that position by claiming that she “won’t go swimming because I refuse to shave [her pubic hair].” In response to the weakening of Gina’s position, Helen constructs a powerful position within this situation (with the use of an extreme case example of ‘hairy’ women coming to the pool “all the time”) and emphatically asserts that Gina not wanting to shave her pubic hair “shouldn’t stop” her from going swimming. Helen’s firm position on this situation prompts a hesitant, vague response of “Yeah. Yeah. No, I ah...I don’t know” from Gina before she manages her constructed ideological dilemma (“it’s that thing), and shifts back to her powerful position (“But that really troubles me that young girls feel this way”).

As further support that Gina’s position shift from powerful to powerless is specific to the topic of pubic hair and swimming, later in the conversation she offers an example of when her position is powerful regarding pubic hair. Specifically, Gina explains that her husband is “obsessed” with waxing “all his pubic hair off,” and that he wants her to remove her pubic hair. In response to this request, Gina constructs a powerful position by saying “Not going to happen!” Gina defends this position by offering the extreme example, “I like ROUGH sex. I fully admit it. I like HARD sex! I don’t want the rubbing, chaffing, ramming, none of that with no pubic hair. It’s naturally there to protect you. It cushions you, it protects you.” This extreme scenario serves to make her account more rhetorically effective (Edley & Wetherell, 1999) and defend her powerful position on the general topics of female pubic hair and female genitals.

6.2.4 Negotiation Strategy 2: It Depends on the Situation

In Excerpts 14 and 15, Eve and Gina construct similar ideological dilemmas. That is, both women weaken their powerful position within a specific conversational

context pertaining to female genitals. To manage their dilemma, both women construct the shift in position as an isolated phenomenon specific to the situation being discussed. Similar to the first negotiation strategy (i.e., blaming society) this strategy occurs often in the transcripts, thereby allowing the participants to discursively draw on both repertoires, as needed, to meet the demands of conversation, while maintaining a coherent way of talking about the topic.

6.2.5 Ideological Dilemma 3: The Distinction Between Theory and Practice

Due to the subtle nature and infrequent use of the theory versus practice strategy, I will provide and discuss only one illustrative example (Excerpt 16). Prior to this excerpt, Angie's position vacillated between her initial powerless position and a more powerful position, depending on the degree of persuasiveness of Beth's argument for a powerful position. During this dyad session, Beth draws extensively on the powerful female genital repertoire to support her arguments and persuade Angie. However, Angie uses both the 'blaming society' and 'that depends on the situation' negotiation strategies to justify her position shifts and allow her to return to a powerless position.

Just prior to Excerpt 16, Beth explains the importance of women having "time to reflect [...] time to be solitary" to facilitate the construction of a powerful position when discussing their genitals. She supports her argument by explaining that "being alone is feeling like you're missing something and solace is having exactly what you need." Angie agrees with Beth and adds that she does her best "self-development" when she is by herself. This agreement signifies a shift, for Angie, toward a more powerful position. In response to Angie's shift, Beth reiterates that self-reflection is "crucial" to a powerful subject position on the topic of female genitals. A five second silence follows before Angie responds:

Excerpt 16 (dyad 1):

ANGIE: You mentioned earlier about women sort of...as they get older, having more insight, let's say, in terms of their sexuality and confidence, you know, perceptions of their genitals. I think that's true, but I don't necessarily assume that it's for everyone. I have this image of a woman who's in her 50s who hasn't really addressed these issues and may not have an opportunity, or may not have created the opportunity. Just haven't had the dialogue [...] you know, there's a half-dozen [women] for every one [woman] that might have progressed to some degree in gaining insight.

This comment resumes the discussion by setting up a scenario that constructs Beth's argument as unrealistic (Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Wetherell, Stiven, & Potter, 1987). That is, Angie reasserts and agrees with a previous comment made by Beth (i.e., "as they [women] get older, having more insight, let's say, in terms of their sexuality and confidence, you know, perceptions of their genitals. I think that's true"), however, Angie adds "but I don't necessarily assume that it's for everyone," which serves to set up the rest of her dialogue in opposition to Beth's argument. The remainder of Angie's argument in this dialogue presents a more 'realistic' scenario (i.e., "there's a half-dozen [women] for every one [woman] that might have progressed to some degree in gaining insight"). Angie's argument does not outrightly contradict Beth's position, but provides Angie with an opportunity to subtly shift back to a position aligning with the powerless female genital interpretative repertoire.

6.2.6 Negotiation Strategy 3: “It’s a good idea, but...”

The “it’s a good idea, but...” (Eve, dyad 3) strategy was previously identified in discursive research involving first-year university students exploring gender equality and employment opportunities, and was labelled the “de jure/de facto or theory/practice strategy” (Wetherell et al., 1987, p. 59). Later subject positioning research by Edley and Wetherell (1999) also identified and discussed this strategy in their sample of young men talking about fatherhood and domestic life. This strategy is described as a ‘face saving’ technique used to separate the “principles” or “ideals” of something from the “practice” of it (Edley & Wetherell, 1999, p. 187). These researchers claim that people often want to present themselves as advocates for a social ideal (e.g., such as gender and racial equality), however, full endorsement of these ideals may construct an extremist subject position (e.g., radical feminist or racist) that may not be favoured in general society. Consequently, to maintain a more ‘socially acceptable’ position, people may start out claiming to be advocates for something, but juxtapose that statement with talk of “practical considerations” (p. 188). This discursive qualification permits the speaker “to defend the *status quo* while deflecting accusations” of extremist positions (p. 188, italics in original text). Although this subject position negotiation strategy has been identified in other research (Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Wetherell et al., 1987), these researchers acknowledge that this strategy is one of the more subtle ideological dilemma management techniques because it often builds over the course of a discussion.

With regard to Excerpt 16, Angie begins her dialogue endorsing the powerfulness of female genitals, but quickly juxtaposes this with the practical consideration that she does not “necessarily assume that it’s for everyone.” She goes on to describe a woman in her 50s who may have been exposed to liberal genital ideals but,

for various reasons, may not have constructed a firm position for powerful female genitals. In addition to this ‘practical’ scenario, Angie concludes by saying “there’s a half-dozen [women] for every one [woman] that might have progressed to some degree in gaining insight.” This statement enables Angie to defend the “status quo” (Edley & Wetherell, 1999, p. 188) that women are predominantly oppressed and suppressed in Western society (thereby shifting her subject position back to a more powerless position), while deflecting accusations of being against the equality of women. Some possible speculations as to what end avoiding extreme positions may serve in discursive interactions will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter (in the section on the untenability of the opposing positions for the construction of female genitals).

It is important to note that the specific discursive interactions (i.e., rhetorical devices and interpretative repertoires) and the subject positions that the participants constructed during the course of their conversations were constructed to suit the moment and with the intention of accomplishing specific goals (e.g., persuasion, alignment, justification). Therefore, the constructed positions cannot be generalized beyond the confines of this research. However, the multiplicity and contradiction in powerful and powerless positions (i.e., ideological dilemmas) and two of the three negotiating strategies discussed were pervasive across this sample of women. That is, the variable and opposing ways of talking about one’s self and the strategies of blaming society and attributing position shifts to the situational contexts can be generalized across the sample of women in this research.

6.3 Variability in Micropolitical Power Dynamics

In addition to actively constructing position on the topic of female genitals by drawing on the opposing female genital repertoires, the research participants’ ways of

talking about female genitals were influenced by the power relations *within* the immediate discursive interactions. Consequently, my fourth aim in my research was to analyze and interpret consistency and variability in the micropolitical power dynamics of the research conversational sessions.

Negotiation of the power dynamics in each dyad began with responses to the first question and continued to be negotiated and renegotiated over the course of the dyad conversations. However, the initial power relation in each group set the power dynamics for the group, and influenced the strategies each woman used when negotiating her position in the conversation (i.e., the more powerful women in the dynamic usually employed acts of persuasion and the less powerful women engaged more in discursive acts that aligned her with the more powerful woman). Interestingly, the woman in each group who constructed and actively maintained a more powerful position in the dyad dynamics was the one who repeatedly drew on both interpretative repertoires, but for specific purposes. That is, each powerful woman in the dyad demonstrated a consistent pattern of: (a) initially constructing a powerful subject position by drawing on the powerful repertoire, (b) comparing and contrasting the powerful and powerless repertoires, (c) actively denigrating the powerless repertoire, and (d) meeting any resistance to her powerful position by backtracking and repeating (b) and (c). Predominantly, the more discursively powerful woman in each dyad dynamic was respectful of the other woman in her dyad. However, there was one situation where the woman in the more powerful position responded to an apparent challenge to her position of power in the dynamic by constructing a discursively disempowering situation that may have served as a means of regaining the powerful position. Since only dyad 1 (Angie and Beth) contains all the elements of the dyad power relations (i.e., (a) through

(d) and a potentially discursive disempowering situation), a more in-depth analysis and interpretation of the micropolitical power dynamics will be done using only excerpts from this dyad.

As previously discussed within the interpretation of the ideological dilemma regarding the role of society (Excerpt 8), Beth immediately constructs a powerful position both for the topic of female genitals and within the group dynamics. Her position of power within the dyad session provides Beth with the means of persuading Angie of the value of Beth's more powerful position on the topic of female genitals. Beth's discursive acts of persuasion begin when she emphasizes that she is "very powered" by her "femaleness," so much so that she is taking the responsibility of communicating the value and powerfulness of female genitals to her daughter. Beth later substantiates this argument by elaborating on how she communicates this message to her daughter (e.g., "shopping for a vagina mirror...when she started being curious" and playing the game "head and shoulders, knees and vulva" together).

Until approximately half-way through the session, Beth maintains the more powerful position in this group dynamic by actively arguing for her powerful subject position. To this end, she compares and contrasts powerful and powerless interpretative repertoires. For example, she discursively promotes positive social resources that aid in the construction of powerful female genitals (e.g., locally owned sex stores designed for women ["there's this wonderful store that's just opened, *Positive Passions*. You should check it out [...] it's lovely and clean [...] it's appealing to everyone"], materials that promote the power of women's sexuality ["erotic books [...] intimate products [...] workshops that just get you acquainted with yourself"], and social events that represent the powerful aspects of female genitals ["the *Vagina Monologues* brought to the

forefront some fantastic examples”]). In her examples, Beth invites Angie to share her powerful position (“You should check it out,” “it’s appealing to everyone,” and “workshops that just get you acquainted with yourself”). This form of persuasion includes Angie in Beth’s examples and serves to construct a companionable environment, yet communicates to Angie that Beth is in a more powerful position within their dynamic because of the variety of social resources she draws on to support her position.

Along with presenting these social symbols of the powerful repertoire, Beth offers comparable powerless examples to illustrate the advantages of a powerful position on the topic. For instance, after talking about how “erotic literature is a positive thing for women to learn about and enjoy their genitals and sexuality,” Beth presents a contrasting example that highlights the lack of positive female genital information for young girls.

Excerpt 17 (dyad 1):

BETH: Looking with my daughter through books. She’s curious about her body, so [...] I’ll bring her lots of books and, um most of them avoid the topic, you know, exactly what the vulva looks like...and she keeps saying, ‘why aren’t there any pictures? I can see what behind my eyeball looks like but there’s no pictures, good pictures of what a vagina looks like, a real vagina.’ There’s just this cheesy line drawn sometimes, but, you know, nothing else.

In this excerpt Beth constructs herself as a mother who actively promotes talk about a powerful position on female genitals to her daughter (“I’ll bring her lots of books”), but that her efforts are challenged by a lack of positive resources (e.g., “there’s

no pictures, good pictures of what a vagina looks like, a real vagina”). This construction of herself, and her use of reported speech (Wood & Kroger, 2000) in this excerpt, may serve as a means of comparing the power dynamics between Beth and her daughter, and Beth and Angie. That is, Beth’s example constructs a dialogue between her daughter and her, where Beth is in the more powerful position in the situation because she provides information about powerful female genitals to her daughter. Even though Angie is not a child, Beth actively draws on the female genital repertoires in her discussion with Angie to construct a similar power dynamic to what she describes in her example with her daughter.

Angie’s response to Beth’s example is to equate her own lack of female genital knowledge as a child. Since Angie responds with a comparable example of her early-life experiences with this topic (which does not serve to challenge Beth’s position on either the topic or in the group dynamics), Beth maintains her position of power in the dyad and moves to the next phase of her persuasive argument: actively denigrating some of the resources that make up the powerless female genital repertoire. Although Beth touches on several sources of powerless female genitals (e.g., “the fear that women and women’s genitals are evil, they’re beautiful and desired and they’re evil...that comes through in art, literature and mythology” and “commercials...like douching and feminine hygiene [...] it’s the immediate shaming...practices of ritually cleansing and stuffing and changing”), she places strong emphasis on her construction of the powerlessness of female genitals in pornography. However, it is Beth’s firm position against pornography that serves to construct opportunities for Angie to discursively challenge Beth’s powerful position in the dyad dynamics. The discursive exchanges between Angie and Beth on the topic of female genitals and pornography are quite

lengthy; hence, I will summarize much of the dialogue, only providing excerpts that are pertinent to the power dynamics in this dyad. Excerpt 18 is an example of Beth's firm position on the topic of pornography.

Excerpt 18 (dyad 1):

BETH: Pornography to me is a DIRTY word. And it represents the patriarchal...kind of dominating women, children, men...it doesn't matter who's involved, there is ALWAYS someone who has to be submissive, or dominated, or-or conquered or something [...] I think that-that is destructive.

In this excerpt Beth uses a metaphor to describe her construction of pornography (i.e., "Pornography to me is a DIRTY word"). Although Beth adds "to me" to this metaphor (indicating that what follows those words is her point of view; Quinn & Radtke, 2006), this metaphor and her verbal emphasis on the word "DIRTY," as well as the intensifier "ALWAYS" in this extreme case formulation (Edley & Wetherell, 1999), serve to make her position on the topic more rhetorically effective. In response to Beth's argument, Angie says:

Excerpt 19:

ANGIE: I think pornography is a bit of a spectrum actually (*BETH: Hum*). I think, you know, there is the underground black market of extreme sort of snuff films that I wish did not exist, and then there is your more, what you categorize as, you know, the pornography of it all. And it comes down to the more female-oriented sexuality, um, based...um, films or even literature. It's all in there somewhere (*BETH: Hum*)...um, I think there's value even in the sort of male-

dominated pornography even if it's to get, even if it comes in a opportunity in a couple's relationship, that they introduce this as an item to help them both get over their inhibitions or experiences in their relationship. But it's a step in terms of getting them to think about it. And it may be extreme...and not the idea or message you want to pass onto your child, but it's-it's a means to do so...um, it's out there. And I think that only now we're starting to...there's a lot of...um, new filmmakers in pornography that are a little more sensual in their approach. Both male and female directors and producers. And I think that's becoming more mainstream and more popular.

Although this excerpt is lengthy, it serves to illustrate the linguistic technique of listing (which falls under the category of an extreme case formulation; Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Wood & Rennie, 1994). This rhetoric strategy of listing several things that are constructed as being relevant to the argument serves to intensify an argument to make it more rhetorically effective and provide a stronger defence of the subject position. In this excerpt, Angie claims "I think pornography is a bit of a spectrum actually." Starting the sentence with "I think" serves to indicate that Angie's position at the onset of this dialogue is hesitant. However, finishing this statement with "actually" indicates that Angie's position on this topic is in opposition to Beth's earlier statements. Since Beth's response of "Hum" can be interpreted as ambiguous, Angie continues her account by listing the types of pornography that would constitute her constructed "spectrum" of this social resource. For example, Angie lists "underground black market of extreme sort of snuff films," "what you categorize as, you know, the pornography of it all," "the more female-oriented sexuality, um, based...um, films or even literature,"

and “the sort of male-dominated pornography.” Further, by saying “But it’s a step in terms of getting them to think about it,” Angie further emphasizes her position by indicating that what comes next (“But”) is in opposition to what Beth said about pornography. That is, Angie’s constructs pornography as a positive resource for people, whereas Beth constructs it as “destructive.” Even though Angie uses listing and the contrastive conjunction “but” (Wood & Kroger, 2000) to strengthen her opposing argument, she also offers a concession to her argument (“it may be extreme...and not the idea or message you want to pass onto your child,”) to reduce the likelihood that her position will be challenged.

Beyond the content of this excerpt, and how it serves to construct a position for Angie on the topic of pornography, it also can serve to challenge Beth’s position both on the topic and in the dyad dynamic. Up to this point, Angie’s position on the general topic of female genitals has been fluctuating between powerless and powerful, but the discursive strategies she uses to manage the variability and inconsistency in her position are focused only on the topic. Angie does not directly challenge Beth’s more powerful discursive position in the dynamic by firmly opposing anything Beth says, until Excerpt 19. Angie’s direct contradiction “there’s value even in the sort of male-dominated pornography” to Beth’s comment in Excerpt 18 of pornography being “destructive” can serve as a means of Angie challenging Beth’s position on the particular topic of pornography, and Beth’s position of power in the dyad dynamic.

Following Excerpt 19, a one minute silence ensues, which triggers me to ask another question to reinitiate the conversation. For the next few minutes conversation is stilted because I ask several probing questions, getting only “Oh yeah” and “Uh hum” from Angie and Beth. This changes, however, when I introduce the topic of the *Vagina*

Monologues again. This shift in topic serves as an opportunity for Beth to backtrack to her argumentative strategy of comparing and contrasting the powerful and powerless interpretative repertoires. For example, Beth once again discusses the positive social visibility and acceptance of female genital issues in social events such as the *Vagina Monologues* and *Vulva Balooza*. Then, Beth constructs a contrast between this positive social trend and a new medical trend toward augmenting female genitals (e.g., “designer vaginas”), which she constructs as promoting the unacceptability of female genitals. Angie resumes her previous position in the dyad dynamic of aligning herself with Beth’s use of the interpretative repertoires. Consequently, the power dynamics within this micropolitical context return to Beth assuming a more powerful position.

The shift back to Beth being in the more powerful position in the dyad dynamic serves as an opportunity for her to again build on her rhetorical strategy by resuming her denigration of resources in the powerless interpretative repertoire. Beth starts with a firm criticism of the media (e.g., magazines, the Internet) for promoting medical procedures to “trim up the labia,” and for promoting shaving and waxing of women’s genital area, whereby women “will pluck EVERY SINGLE HAIR out of their POOOR selves to-to please their husband, because otherwise he won’t go down on her...she has to be completely PLUCKED like a turkey.” She accuses these media of constructing “only one aesthetic” for female genitals, and she firmly states that she cannot imagine why “any self-respecting woman would get into that position.”

Discussing removal of pubic hair brings Beth’s conversation back to pornography, as illustrated in Excerpt 20 that follows soon after Beth’s last comment:

Excerpt 20 (dyad 1):

BETH: And again, thinking about couples, you know, getting pornography. I-

I-I would be curious. Again, with just the people that I know. It's isn't usually the woman saying 'let's go get this and relax ourselves' because I think that there are different things that relax (*ANGIE: hum*) and possibly get her ready for sex. Not that there isn't a place for erotic images and stuff, but I think what I consider to be pornography is rarely a woman's choice.

Even though Beth initially stages this argument by distancing herself from the reported events (i.e., making her claim that women do not usually suggest getting pornography by reporting what other people she knows have said [footing; Goffman, 1981 as cited in Wood & Kroger, 2000]), she finishes by firmly stating that what she considers to be pornography "is rarely a woman's choice." Angie responds to Beth's argument with "Right" and then the following dialogue occurs (this dialogue has been edited to highlight the components that are relevant to my discussion on micropolitical power dynamics):

Excerpt 21 (dyad 1):

BETH: For myself, I-I think that porn tends to take away a woman's confidence in HER OWN ability to be sexual. In her own...um, authorship of her sexuality [...]

ANGIE: I've actually been that female to suggest pornography in a relationship ...um, I wouldn't say it is a habit on a great number of occasions, but during a previous relationship, just to, sort of, spice things up (*BETH: Um*) in a sense [...] and I've been on the flip side as well, having a former partner suggest pornography, and that-that was great for our relationship.

Beth begins this segment of dialogue making the firm statement “porn tends to take away a woman’s confidence in HER OWN ability to be sexual. In her own...um, authorship of her sexuality.” Instead of responding directly to this comment by Beth, Angie’s response focuses on Beth’s earlier comment (in Excerpt 20) that “pornography is rarely a woman’s choice.” Since this earlier statement by Beth constructs a situation where it is unlikely (“rarely”) that a woman would willingly suggest pornography, Angie’s example of herself not only suggesting “pornography in a relationship” to “spice things up,” but that it was “great” for the relationship provides a challenge to Beth’s construction of pornography. Further, Angie’s example that pornography can be a woman’s choice, and that a woman can construct this resource as a positive aspect of her sexuality serves to frame Beth’s argument that pornography can “take away” a woman’s “authorship of her sexuality” as not as effective. Even though Angie indirectly contradicts Beth’s position on the topic of pornography, Angie’s firm position on the benefits of pornography can still serve to challenge Beth’s position, both on the topic of pornography and within the power dynamic of the dyad.

In response to Angie’s comment in Excerpt 21, Beth and Angie engage in a lengthy negotiation dialogue on the topic of pornography. To summarize, they come to the concession that they are constructing different definitions of pornography, yet neither woman is able to provide an explicit definition. However, they move beyond the issue of definitional ambiguity, and Beth returns to her earlier point (Excerpt 21) by saying:

Excerpt 22 (dyad 2):

BETH: You know, there are things like that I-I think undermine our self-

esteem (*ANGIE: Hum*) as women, you know. And I mean, I'm not saying that, you know, I mean your brain is your own domain, and, you know, I really believe that, but-but I think there is this-this feeling that we never quite measure up, you know...and pornography helps, you know, again, the kind that I describe as pornography, (*ANGIE: Uh hum*) helps to undermine REAL women, you know.

ANGIE: And I would never disagree with that.

This particular excerpt of dialogue is rich with meaning, particularly the phrase “pornography helps to undermine REAL women.” For example, in conjunction with Beth’s previous dialogue on pornography, the term “REAL women” serves to construct a standard, partly contingent on a woman’s position on pornography, for who can be constructed as a woman. That is, women who share the same position on pornography as Beth are “REAL women,” and women who construct pornography as a positive aspect of their sexuality are somehow less than “REAL.”

Besides constructing a standard of womanhood, the statement “pornography helps to undermine REAL women” also can serve as a challenge for positioning in the dyad dynamics. To explain, after Angie’s challenge to Beth’s position of power in the dyad (Excerpt 19), Beth resumes her rhetorical efforts and regains the more powerful position in the dyad. The power dynamics between them continues until Excerpt 21, where Angie indirectly challenges Beth’s position of power in the group. The subsequent dialogue on the ambiguity of the definition of pornography serves to facilitate power dynamic negotiations, and up until Excerpt 22 the discursive power is distributed equally between them. However, Beth’s use of the extreme case formulation

(Edley & Wetherell, 1999), “pornography helps to undermine REAL women,” serves to challenge Angie for the more powerful position in the dyad.

Thinking about the possibilities in this situation, Angie could accept the discursive challenge and rhetorically defend her position on pornography by providing some form of support (e.g., another account that illustrates that pornography has not “undermined” her self-esteem or sexuality). Another possibility is that Angie could have ignored Beth’s comment and changed the topic. However, Angie chooses to say “And I would NEVER disagree with that,” and follows up shortly afterwards with:

Excerpt 23:

ANGIE: Yeah, I don’t know. I...a lot of our discussion has really made me think about some things, and why I do some things I do even, you know? I don’t really see myself as woman that’s...yeah, I have my insecurities, but, you know, I’m very comfortable with who I am and even myself sexually and...um, and I guess I don’t see some of the things I do, as in terms of submitting or um...yeah, I-I don’t know, it’s really...

Angie’s use of hesitant language (e.g., “I guess”, frequent breaks in talking, incomplete sentences) in this excerpt indicates that she is discussing a potentially sensitive topic and she is avoiding positioning herself clearly (Quinn & Radtke, 2006). Further, the phrase “has really made me” serves to present Angie as a passive and unwilling participant in this discussion (Wood & Rennie, 1994). Considering Angie’s response to Beth’s earlier comments, I would speculate that Beth’s statement that “pornography helps to undermine REAL women” serves to disempower Angie in this micropolitical context, thereby restoring the more powerful position in the dyad to Beth.

Reflecting on my own construction of this interaction between Angie and Beth, I think it is reasonable to construct this discursive situation as disempowering. To explain, I share a similar position on the topic of pornography as Angie, and reflecting on how I constructed Beth's comment regarding "REAL women" at the time it was spoken, my initial response to Beth's argument also was to back down. Even reading and analyzing the transcripts now, I would be hesitant to enter into a conversation on the topic of pornography with Beth after the apparent standard she constructed for a woman. Frankly, the one statement "pornography helps to undermine REAL women" constructs a complex and potentially risky situation. That is, any counter arguments risk criticism of not valuing and respecting women.

While this example of the power dynamics between Angie and Beth is relatively representative of the micropolitical power relations in all four dyad groups, it is important to note that the research context is an artificial social situation constructed for the purposes of exploring the topic of female genitals. Therefore, the power relations between the women in the dyad groups, and the positions of power the women construct for themselves in the context of the research conversational sessions, cannot be generalized outside of the context in which they are constructed. That is, just because Beth assumes a powerful position in this conversational session with Angie and uses various discursive strategies to maintain that powerful position does not mean that other conversations between Angie and Beth would be the same. Nor can we assume that either Angie or Beth would construct the same positions of power in conversations with other people on the topic of female genitals.

6.4 The Untenability of the Opposing Positions for the Construction of Female Genitals

My research findings of multiplicity and contradiction in discursive constructions of subject positioning are consistent with other subject positioning research involving opposing interpretative repertoires (Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Quinn & Radtke, 2006; Wood & Rennie, 1994). For example, Quinn and Radtke (2006) explored women's talk regarding feminism and feminists. Findings indicated that all the participants discursively constructed two opposing versions (i.e., interpretative repertoires) of feminism: "a negative, extremist version and a liberal version" (p. 193). This finding was consistent with the research conducted by Edley and Wetherell (2001) in which male participants discursively constructed extreme versions of feminists: "benign, sane, and rational" versions likened to Jekyll and "monstrous ogre or fiend...threatening women" represented by Hyde (p. 444).

While the research findings for these two studies were similar with regard to the construction of opposing interpretative repertoires, Quinn and Radtke's (2006) study expanded on Edley and Wetherell's (2001) research. Specifically, Quinn and Radtke (2006) explored how women used interpretative repertoires when positioning themselves in the topic of feminism. One interesting finding was that the women constructed the additional interpretative repertoire of "lifestyle feminism" (p. 194). This repertoire operated similar to a negotiation strategy because it allowed the participants to manage ideological dilemmas and facilitate flexibility in their discursive construction of subject positions. In other words, they could adopt components from both extremist and liberal interpretative repertoires and mix these with a non-feminist position to suit the demands of the discursive situation.

In addition, the women who participated in the study by Quinn and Radtke (2006) avoided constructing either an exclusive feminist or not feminist position. The researchers speculated that women avoided subject positions that aligned with either of these extremes because both of those positions would be untenable or difficult to defend. That is, identifying with an exclusive feminist position would be risking criticism of being an extreme radical feminist (a socially unfavourable position; Edley & Wetherell, 2001), and identifying as not a feminist puts a woman at risk of being criticized for opposing equality for women.

Further, another study on subject positioning (Edley and Wetherell, 1999) explored how young men drew on two contradictory interpretative repertoires of masculinity (i.e., “new and traditional ‘kinds’ of men”; p. 190, single quotes in original text). Similar to Quinn and Radtke’s (2006) research, Edley and Wetherell (1999) found that participants avoided discursively constructing a position that was exclusive to either of the extremes because both were considered untenable.

With regard to my research all the women drew on both opposing interpretative repertoires to position themselves on the topic of female genitals, and used at least two of the negotiation strategies to manage contradictions in their discursively constructed identities. As well, none of the participants constructed a genital position that was exclusive to either extreme interpretative repertoire. This later finding is consistent with Edley and Wetherell (1999) and Quinn and Radtke’s (2006) studies, hence suggesting that these are untenable positions. But what makes exclusive positioning within either the powerful and powerless female genital repertoires untenable?

To speculate on a possible answer to this question I draw from the data and research literature. First, with regard to an exclusive position within the powerful

female genital repertoire, it is possible that this position would risk criticism of extreme feminism. For example, several participants commented on how they believe other people construct the feminist message underlying the *Vagina Monologues*:

Excerpt 24 (dyad 2):

DONNA: Certain people judge other people who go to those things like *Vagina Monologues*.

Excerpt 24 (dyad 3):

FRAN: There's this anti-male notion running under a lot of it [*Vagina Monologues*] [...] I think the idea behind *Vagina Monologues* is pretty intimidating.

Excerpt 25 (dyad 1):

BETH: It [*Vagina Monologues*] can be seen as a hostile environment for men [...] there might be some people who walk away saying, 'I'm never going back, they're a bunch of man-hating, blah, blah, blahs' [...] if women are in power that must somehow mean that men are being kept down. I think that's still the backlash against feminism. If women are getting power that means someone has to be giving it up, and it's got to be men...certainly that's scary.

These excerpts support the notion that constructing position that draws exclusively from the powerful female genital repertoire may be viewed by society as being an extreme feminist position that is "hostile" and "anti-male." Coupling these comments from my participants with the research by Edley and Wetherell (2001) and Quinn and Radtke (2006) provides further support for the speculation that an exclusive powerful position on the topic of female genitals would be an unfavourable position in society.

Similarly, an exclusive powerless position on the topic also is constructed by my participants as undesirable. For example, the resources within the powerless repertoire are described as “anti-feminist” (Gina, dyad 4), “extremely repressed” (Cathy, dyad 2), and “a dark patriarchal force convincing us to give up all our womanhood” (Beth, dyad 1). Further, women constructed as exclusively positioned in this repertoire are described as “property of men to be penetrated” (Gina, dyad 4) and “subordinate to men on really all levels” (Donna, dyad 2). The general theme encompassing the participants’ terms and phrases regarding the powerless repertoire would be that women with a powerless position on the topic of female genitals are victims. But is being a victim an undesirable subject position?

Discursive research (Wood & Rennie, 1994) on the construction of women as victims in society found that women avoid constructing themselves as a victim. Specifically, these researchers interviewed eight women who had been raped at least once by a man she knew and found that women constructed both advantages and disadvantages to being a victim. The advantages included that they were not to blame for being raped, they had the “right to suffer” and were “entitled to counselling” (p. 137). The disadvantages included living in a society that does not value victims and having a life that is “unsuccessful” and “completely devastated” (p. 137). All the participants concluded that being constructed as a victim was an undesirable subject position.

Considering my research data and the findings from other research, it seems reasonable to conclude that construction of a subject position on female genitals exclusive to one of the two opposing interpretative repertoires would be untenable because both positions are not currently valued or respected by society. Specifically, an

extreme powerful position constructs women as too independent from society and an extreme powerless position constructs them as too dependent on society. Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that a valued and respected subject position must be negotiated between the two extremes.

Reflecting on this research and my own position on the topic of female genitals, I would find it difficult to exclusively defend either extreme position in our current society. There are many advantages to being a feminist, but extreme feminism may be limiting (e.g., professionally and in intimate personal relationships) in today's society. Similarly, extreme powerlessness may construct social situations where a woman is perpetually disadvantaged, again limiting her professional and personal opportunities.

6.5 Some Final Considerations

In Chapter 3, while summarizing the textual resources for the powerless female genital interpretative repertoire, I posed two questions. First, how does a woman construct a powerful position on the topic of female genitals if certain acts (e.g., sexual assault) construct situations that dictate it is in her best interest to regulate certain actions (e.g., what she chooses to wear, where she goes, who she goes with), and give up some of her agency to be physically safe? Second, if society constructs female genitals as dangerous in order to promote suppression and domination by men, how can female genitals also be constructed as dangerous and powerful? Even though these questions were not explicitly addressed in my data generation, and were not included in the specific aims of my data analyses, my data do allow me to speculate a possible response to each question.

The first question has been a dilemma for women for a considerable length of time (Muscio, 2002; Tanenbaum, 2000), and it is unlikely that one study is going to be

able to produce an answer. However, I can speculate as to how women negotiate this dilemma. To this end, I propose we consider my data analysis and interpretation of the third ideological dilemma and negotiation strategy (i.e., theory versus practice – “it’s a good idea, but...”; Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Wetherell et al., 1987).

In this subsection of subject positioning on the topic of female genitals, I discuss how Angie constructs the argument that although the powerfulness of female genitals is good in theory, it is difficult for everyone to put in practice. Thus, sometimes it is necessary to recognize the socially constructed status quo while working toward a personal or cultural ideal. This principle also can be applied to the first question. In particular, having unabridged powerfulness for female genitals is an ideal worth working toward, but the current construction of the social structure of our society (i.e., women are not equal to men) renders this ideal unrealistic. Consequently, if a woman constructs a powerful position on the topic of female genitals, she may need to use personal agency to reconstruct her position to her social milieu.

Unlike the first question, the second question can be addressed in my research data. Four of my participants (Gina and Helen – dyad 4 and Angie and Beth – dyad 1) discuss the social construction of female genitals as dangerous and being associated with both powerlessness and powerfulness. Since the discursive construction of this dilemma is relatively comparable in both discussions, I will use excerpts from Gina and Helen’s conversation to illustrate this dilemma. Their discussion begins with a lengthy monologue from Gina regarding the historical male oppression of female genitals to protect the parentage of children (e.g., “it all becomes SO SCARY for men to think, OH MY GOD some other man has penetrated my wife, or penetrated my property...whose

kid is this?”). Gina then goes on to elaborate how female genitals are constructed as dangerous:

Excerpt 26 (dyad 4):

GINA: Female genitals are dangerous, so genitals closed means men are safe [...] closed genitals equals a safe world because everyone is in their boxes...open genitals is chaos! (*HELEN: Yeah!*) Women’s-women’s legs open is chaos. Oh my God, whose kid is that! Oh my God, you know like, women are ruling the world! Oh my God, women are enjoying their own vaginas! Oh my God, you know, like it-it’s CHAOS. (*HELEN: Yeah.*) Whereas closed legs, it’s safe.

In this excerpt, Gina uses the metaphor “Female genitals are dangerous,” and the analogy “closed genitals equals a safe world [...] open genitals is chaos!” to intensify this extreme case formulation (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). Essentially, this excerpt constructs men as promoting the need to dominate and suppress women’s dangerous genitals.

Later in the conversation, Gina comes back to the point of the dangerousness of female genitals, but uses a different discursive construction:

Excerpt 27 (dyad 4):

GINA: A woman’s body is far more beautiful than a man’s [...] a woman’s body, it’s curvy, it’s soft, it...it doesn’t have this weird thing just hanging there, you know (*HELEN: Uh hum.*) [...] Whereas with a woman’s body, everything just seems to fit. It’s-it’s just perfect [...] a woman’s body is beautiful and sensual...and it’s kind of-of nice that her sexuality...genitals are a secret, a mystery [...] sexy that

sometimes you don't know when a woman is turned on...and that also makes them dangerous to men.

Although this excerpt contains an interesting comparison between male and female genitals, what is important to the discussion on the dangerousness of female genitals (and the contradiction to how it is constructed Excerpt 26) is Gina's reference to female genitals being "a secret, a mystery," which "also makes them dangerous to men." Gina raises an interesting point that touches on the crux of the contradiction in the construction of the dangerousness of female genitals. Specifically, a patriarchal society constructs female genitals as dangerous to validate male domination and oppression (this construction is discussed in the literature review regarding the biting 'toothed' vagina; e.g., Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Hobby, 2000). Juxtaposed with this construction is another social construction that female genitals are invisible in fashion magazines (Bramwell, 2000). According to Bramwell (2000), this constructs female genitals as socially unacceptable. This is *one* interpretation, yet, we should consider that this invisibility also may construct female genitals as "a secret, a mystery." What you cannot see has an aura of elusiveness. Taking this a step farther, what is elusive and mysterious can be dangerous and can have power because you cannot control what you do not understand.

CHAPTER SEVEN – DISCUSSION

7.1 Research Framework

My research adhered to Potter and Wetherell's (1987) version of social constructionism, which assumes that personal positions are constructed and negotiated through interactions between people. The research dyad conversations provided me with the opportunity to explore the construction of women's subject positions on the topic of female genitals in a specific context, at particular moments in time. Further, my research was informed by the combined theoretical approach of feminist discursive psychology and critical discursive theory. The synthesis of these theoretical perspectives allowed me to move beyond description and the cognitive reductionist approach of understanding a phenomenon, to challenging the function of the participants' talk as it appears in the immediate research context (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; van Dijk, 1993). Put simply, I was able to analyse and interpret not only what the participants said, but how they said it and some of the ends to which they discursively oriented themselves within the context of their dyad session using the identified interpretative repertoires.

The critical discourse analysis methodology was used to systematically analyze and interpret a varied selection of available discursive textual resources (pertaining to female genitals in Western society), and the transcribed conversations of eight women who each participated once in a dyad conversational session. The main focus of my

research was to explore how and to what ends women organized their talk about female genitals. The specific aims of my data analysis were to: (a) identify the interpretative repertoires that the participants in my research were drawing on during the course of their dyad conversational session, and compare the participants' repertoires to those identified in my brief review of available textual resources; (b) explore the subject positioning, ideological dilemmas and discursive negotiation strategies of the participants as they constructed, defended and negotiated positioning on the topic of female genitals; and (c) analyze and interpret the power dynamics within the dyad conversational sessions. As well, my data analysis included speculation regarding the participants' avoidance of constructing either an exclusively powerful or powerless position on the topic of female genitals, and consideration of two questions posed during the review of the relevant literature in Chapter 3.

7.2 Microanalysis of Participants' Talk

The women in this study drew on both the powerful and powerless female genital interpretative repertoires to argue and defend multiple, and often contradictory, subject positions when they discussed female genitals in the dyad sessions. Even though these women discursively demonstrated a strong pull toward a position that aligned with the powerful interpretative repertoire, their powerful subject positions were tenuous. To explain, each woman talked about at least one personal situation that illustrated the powerful female genital interpretative repertoire (e.g., attending *Vagina Monologues*, actively discussing female genitals with family and friends, taking responsibility for the health of her genitals by having regular pap smears and wearing condoms during sexual intercourse). The discursive strength of to the powerful position was usually illustrated via linguistic intensifiers (e.g., "really," "never," "definitely," "anything," "incredibly")

that were part of an extreme case formulation (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). That is, these women would exaggerate or overstate their account (e.g., “*Vagina Monologues* has been an INCREDIBLY positive thing for women’s vaginas” [Gina, dyad 4]), sometimes present implausible scenarios (e.g., “my friend and me talk about our genitals and female genitals ALL the time in the computer lab at the university” [Helen, dyad 4]), and mock elements of the powerless repertoire to argue for the powerful subject position (e.g., “you’re going to have sex with someone you need to douche...to smell like an apple orchard...I’m like, NO, actually I need to smell like a pussy for them”). Further, the women used first person (“I”) to strengthen their arguments by constructing the topic of the discussion as specifically relevant to them. As well, all the participants used temporal markers (Wood & Kroger, 2000) to illustrate how their subject position on the topic of female genitals has moved from alignment with the powerless repertoire to active defence of the powerful repertoire (e.g., “[in] high school...you don’t REALLY talk about it much, but...definitely in this past year I’ve become WAY more with it” [Helen, dyad 4]). These discursive devices served to make the women’s accounts of the powerful repertoire more rhetorically effective, and illustrate that they construct it as more favourable than the powerless repertoire.

However, all the participants contradicted their use of the powerful repertoire with other personal accounts that aligned with the powerless female genital repertoire (e.g., “maybe I don’t yet value what my genitals has to offer” [Angie, dyad 1], “I do feel guilty for feeling...SO disgusted by certain aspects of it [female genitals; Eve, dyad 3]). In addition to explicit contradictions to the powerful position, these women used discursive qualifiers in their talk to shift their position and avoid exclusive alignment with the powerful repertoire. For example, often their talk was hesitant (e.g., repeating

words, frequent breaks in their talk, incomplete sentences), uncertain and vague (e.g., saying “I think,” “I guess,” “I don’t know,” “I kind of feel”), and ambiguous (e.g., “we don’t talk about that kind of stuff” [Cathy, dyad 2]). As well, they attributed ideas to other people (i.e., footing and reported speech; Wood & Kroger, 2000) and switched from first person singular (“I”) to referring to themselves from the viewpoint of another person (“you”). In addition to weakening the participants’ positions, these discursive devices served to distance the women from what was being said.

But what does it mean when these women contradict themselves, distance themselves from the topic and construct tenuous subject positions? One speculation is that female genitals are a sensitive topic that is not usually part of everyday conversations for these women. Even though they volunteered for this research knowing that we were going to be talking about female genitals, and their talk illustrated that they drew on the powerful interpretative repertoire, the participants were placed in an unfamiliar, artificially constructed situation with other women they did not know. To some degree, they may have constructed this situational context as intimidating or invasive to their privacy. Such a construction may account for the variability in how much personal information about their genitals these women shared (e.g., Cathy only shared three personal stories about her genitals, whereas Gina shared 13).

Further, it is likely that the participants constructed some form of discursive agenda before attending their research session, yet did not anticipate that their position would be discursively challenged within the micropolitical context of the research session. Thus, the women’s talk needed to be flexible and reflexive to enable them to defend or shift their subject position within this rhetorical context. Hence, it is reasonable to speculate that the frequent defence and negotiation of their subject

positions in the research context (via providing evidence from the repertoires) contributed to how they constructed their positions (e.g., hesitant versus firm, personal account versus a story about someone else), as well as the variability and inconsistency of the interpretative repertoires they drew upon when constructing a subject position on this topic.

Does this mean that these women would be able to maintain a firm, exclusive subject position using the powerful female genital interpretative repertoire in other conversational contexts? It is possible that there are some discursive situations that would enable these women to construct and sustain talk exclusive to the powerful female genital repertoire. However, based on the examples the women provided regarding other situational contexts where they have engaged in talk about female genitals (e.g., with physicians, mothers, co-workers, intimate partners, friends) both interpretative repertoires were drawn upon when constructing the accounts of talk used in these specific situations. For example, Donna reported talking with her grandmother about keegle exercises and having sex, yet she said that she will not talk with her grandmother about how female sexuality is constructed in the television show *Sex in the City* (“I don’t talk about everything with certain people. I wouldn’t tell my grandma certain things because she judges”). What does it mean when a woman tempers and regulates her powerful subject position while talking about female genitals?

As discussed in the chapter on data analysis, women avoid exclusively positioning their talk within the feminist interpretative repertoire because this position risks the criticism of extreme feminism and is constructed as socially unfavourable (Quinn & Radtke, 2006). Since many social resources regarding female genitals (e.g., *Vagina Monologues*, literature such as *Cunt: A declaration of independence* [Muscio,

2002], feminist research) are either constructed or endorsed by radical feminists, drawing exclusively from the powerful interpretative repertoire constructs an association with radical feminism. Therefore, even though the participants' talk was drawn to the powerful female genital repertoire (both within the specific context of the dyad session and in discursive accounts of other situational contexts), it is reasonable to speculate that the participants' softening and regulating of their powerful subject position when talking about female genitals served as a means to avoid association with radical feminism.

In contrast, exclusive alignment with the powerless female genital interpretative repertoire would risk the socially unfavourable criticism of being against the equality of women. Hence, to avoid a subject position that exclusively aligns with either the powerful or powerless repertoire the participants shifted their positions between the two extremes and subsequently constructed ideological dilemmas. That is, since alignment with either extreme position was unfavourable, and being unjustifiably ambiguous would risk being criticized as having no opinion (also unlikely because these women volunteered for this research, which suggests they have an opinion on this topic), the participants discursively constructed negotiation strategies to manage their dilemmas. These discursive strategies (i.e., blaming society, attributing position shifts to the situational context, and the distinction between theory and practice) served as a means for the women to coherently justify the shifts in their subject positions on the topic. That is, a woman could actively draw on the powerful female genital repertoire, but when the other participant challenged how she used the powerful repertoire to construct her subject position, she could contradict herself by drawing on the powerless repertoire and then justify this position shift by using one of the negotiation strategies. But what makes

these particular negotiation strategies effective in managing ideological dilemmas relevant to female genitals?

These strategies may be applicable for ideological dilemmas constructed in how people talk about many topics (e.g., sexism, racism). However, what makes them effective for the participants in my research is that all the women recognized, and endorsed, the use of these strategies as a means of discursively absolving themselves of responsibility for their inconsistent use of the interpretative repertoires. No one was criticized for blaming society or the specific topic being discussed, or for endorsing the status quo and avoiding an extremist position. Instead, when one woman in the dyad either blamed society or the specific topic, the other woman endorsed the use of the strategy by also using it. But what benefit does the unconditional use and endorsement of these strategies have?

It is possible that the research context constructed an environment that did not support these women engaging in contentious dialogue. The consent form does state that “it is imperative that all participants understand that the focus group is a non-judgmental, safe environment in which everyone can express their views without fear of criticism or ridicule.” However, these women did challenge and criticize each other when it came to the content of the conversations. For example, Fran challenged and criticized Eve for constructing removal of pubic hair as socially deviant, and Angie challenged and criticized Beth for denigrating the use of pornography in intimate relationships. However, these criticisms can be constructed as verbal reproaches for not respecting other women’s choices, as opposed to criticisms of variability and inconsistency in subject positioning on the topic of female genitals.

So, what makes the use of these particular negotiation strategies acceptable to this sample of women? I speculate that it is not something unique to each strategy, rather something inherent in all of them. That is, each strategy has an underlying connection to the oppression of female genitals in a patriarchal society (i.e., blaming society and saying that someone's position shift to using elements of the powerless repertoire is reasonable because powerlessness is "pervasive in society," or attributing position shifts to a specific situation that is socially constructed as undesirable, or justifying a woman's lack of discursive endorsement of the powerfulness of female genitals by constructing the ideal of 'powerfulness' as impractical in our current socio-political environment).

Even though these women drew significantly on the powerful female genital repertoire, and discursively endorsed an abolition of the components of the powerless repertoire, they still took up the position that women are predominantly bound by their social milieus. Criticizing another woman for discursively constructing herself as influenced by her social environments and interactions would be an ineffective way of endorsing and promoting the positive goal of valuing and respecting female genitals that is inherent in the powerful female genital repertoire. The feminist movement encourages women to be "partners in action" (Tong, 1989, p. 7) to "beat the system" (p. 2); it does not deny that women are often constrained by their social system.

7.3 Nothing New is Something New

Although I have conducted other research exploring female genitals (e.g., Ellis et al., 2006), and I have read many textual resources on the topic, I conducted this research assuming that my participants would tell me something new about female genitals. I was not sure what that 'new' thing was going to be, just that it would be something other

than what I have read in the literature and heard from other women. However, that was not the case. Instead, the women in this study discursively constructed the same opposing interpretative repertoires for female genitals as are constructed in the relevant literature. Further, with the exception of a new trend for the beautification of female genitals (e.g., waxing, cosmetic female genital augmentation), the issues inherent in the powerful and powerless female genital interpretative repertoires are old themes that women have been struggling with for decades (e.g., demand for respect and equality; abolition of oppression, domination, abuse). Consequently, what does this finding suggest about women's talk about female genitals?

It is possible that these women were constrained by the situational context of the research sessions when they were talking about female genitals. Being in an unfamiliar place, talking to women one does not know, having someone tape record everything one says, and knowing that one's talk is going to be analysed for research purposes can be intimidating and influence what one is willing to share. It is possible that these women used the opposing interpretative repertoires as a social script which served as a means to contribute to the research, yet did not put them at risk of being criticized for talk not consistent with current social ideologies regarding female genitals.

Although this explanation is reasonable, it is also possible that, regardless of the context, the talk of these women would have been firmly embedded in one or both of the opposing repertoires. This speculation suggests that these interpretative repertoires are pervasive in our society and are powerful influences in women's talk about female genitals. Further, it suggests that these repertoires are useful for women when they are discussing this topic, but that the repertoires also are constraining to the point that women do not talk about anything substantively new with regard to female genitals.

Does that mean that there is nothing new to learn from my research? I understand my research as contributing two pieces of information to our knowledge about female genitals. First, although my participants consistently relied on the powerful female genital repertoire, they were unable to firmly position themselves only within this repertoire. This finding underscores the power of the powerless repertoire, in that, even within a context that pulls for use of the powerful repertoire (i.e., a research study in which women volunteered to talk about female genitals), the powerless repertoire was not always resisted.

The second contribution to the existing knowledge of female genitals relates to differences in how participants and researchers interpret information pertaining to female genitals. Specifically, in Chapter 6 (additional analyses) excerpts from Gina (dyad 4) constructed a contradiction in how the dangerousness of female genitals has been interpreted in relevant literature and research. Moving beyond the interpreted social constructions of the dangerousness of female genitals to focus on the interpretations of invisibility of female genitals, Gina constructed hidden female genitals as powerful because they are “a secret, a mystery.” In contrast, Bramwell’s (2000) research constructed the invisibility of female genitals in fashion magazines as powerlessness for female genitals. This contradiction in interpretation illustrates the necessity for research exploring *women’s* constructions and interpretations of information pertaining to female genitals available in our society. It is possible that researchers’ interpretations of social resources and situational contexts regarding the powerlessness of female genitals are contributing to the discursive construction of powerlessness of female genitals in our society, rather than liberating women with knowledge.

7.4 Research Limitations

Although I consider the research approach I used to explore the subject positions in women's talk about female genitals to be appropriate, it does have limitations. First, the use of Potter and Wetherell's (1987) version of social constructionism constrained my use of imagination and creative meaning making when analysing the data. From this perspective, the researcher does not study the world of the participant or capture the phenomenology of the topic beyond the data. Therefore, I was not able to construct an abstract meaning for female genitals. Rather, my data analyses were limited to the participants' constructions of female genitals, and the construction and negotiation of power dynamics within the context of the research conversational sessions. Further, although I was reflexive during data analyses by constantly questioning myself as to why I was reading a passage in a particular way, and what features of the passage produced my reading, this approach does not include the researcher engaging in self-analysis regarding what was learned during the research.

Second, I illustrated the use of the combined theoretical approach of feminist discursive theory and critical discursive theory, but this approach has not been used in other research exploring female genitals. Therefore, there were no specific academic resources that I could draw on to assist me with analysis and interpretation of my data. Consequently, I relied heavily on the checks and balances that are inherent in critical discourse analysis (i.e., audit trails; memos; constant self-reflexivity; consultation with my supervisor, committee and academic peers; participant feedback from the comprehensive summaries of the dyad session transcripts; and direct quotes to illustrate that the multiplicity and contradictions in the constructed and negotiated subject positions are grounded in the data; Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Third, even though cultural diversity was welcome in this study, I did not specifically recruit women from diverse cultural backgrounds. The women involved in my research predominantly self-reported as Caucasian (N = 7/8). Therefore, the results must be considered from that specific perspective. Fourth, it is important to remember that discourse is multi-layered, and it would be naïve to assume that I have fully identified and interpreted *all* the possible ways in which women position themselves when talking about female genitals.

Finally, discourse is constructed to suit the rhetorical demands of specific situations and cannot be generalized beyond the immediate context (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). In the case of my research, I constructed an artificial social environment (i.e., the dyad conversational sessions) that generated discourse specific to that context. Yet, considering the macroanalytical perspective that is inherent in the type of research I have conducted, the uniformity of the patterns of discursive practices and strategies across this sample suggests robustness and pervasiveness of the results. Therefore, even though broad generalizations cannot be made from the results, the findings can be linked to “broader social/discursive practices” (p. 191). For example, these women can be viewed as “the battleground upon which the war between cultural ideals is raging” (Edley & Wetherell, 1999, p. 186). That is, the participants’ multiple and inconsistent ways of talking about female genitals might represent a discursive ambiguity regarding this topic among women in our society. Since the social ideologies (e.g., beliefs, laws and government policies) of a society are constructed and reconstructed through language by the people who constitute the society (van Dijk, 1999), ambiguity in discursive constructions of female genitals could hinder reforms to social policies that promote the respect and consideration of female genitals. Even with these limitations,

my research approach allowed me to explore the discursive phenomenon of subject positioning on the topic of female genitals in a respectful manner that generated robust and valuable results.

7.5 Future Research

Even though my research advances knowledge and theory, further research needs to be conducted to explore how, to what ends, and when women discursively use available social resources while constructing, defending and negotiating a subject position during talk about their genitals and female genitals in general. Future research using the methodological approach I have implemented may consider involving larger groups of women to explore differences in discursive practices and management strategies when several women discuss the topic of female genitals. As well, research involving women of different ethnicities and religious affiliations, specific age groups (e.g., older women, teenagers), different sexual orientations (e.g., lesbians, bisexuals) and varied socio-economic groups would contribute to our understanding of the influence of these demographic factors on women's talk about female genitals. Also, women who have experienced a specific life event (e.g., childbirth, menopause, sexual violation) may use their talk to construct different subject positions on this topic. For example, a woman who has recently given birth may talk about her genitals differently than a woman who has been sexually assaulted.

Further, certain occupations (e.g., homemakers, sex trade workers, academics) may influence talk about female genitals. For instance, a sex trade worker may discursively position herself differently on this topic than a university Math professor. Also, exploring the subject positioning of women who are actively engaged in social interactions to promote the powerfulness of female genitals in Canadian society (e.g.,

feminist activist groups) may contribute to our understanding of discursive negotiation strategies, and micropolitical power dynamics, when women are discussing female genitals. As well, in addition to different demographic factors, future research might consider employing other data generation methods (e.g., Internet discussion groups) to assist in accessing harder-to-reach populations, and women who are uncomfortable discussing this topic during a face-to-face interaction.

Finally, it would be interesting to employ a less empirical version of social constructionism (e.g., Crotty [1998]) that would allow the researcher to actively engage with the participants during data generation, whereby the researcher co-constructs meaning about female genitals with the participants at the end of each conversational session by discussing what everyone learned from the research conversation. As well, Crotty's (1998) version of constructionism would permit the researcher to engage in creative, abstract meaning making which might add a new level to our understanding of female genitals in our society.

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FOOTNOTES

¹It is important to outline some distinctions between the various branches of feminism. Specifically, there are seven main feminist theorists: “liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, existentialist, socialist, or postmodern” (Tong, 1989, p. 1). Liberal feminists stress that the constraints imposed on women in society are based on social policies and gender customs that limit the potential of women (Tong, 1989). These feminists argue that gender equality can be achieved if both sexes operate with the same social rules and resources. In contrast, Marxist feminists do not believe that equality for women can be achieved in a society where the majority of the population is powerless and work for the benefit of the few who are wealthy and powerful. Radical feminists operate from a more extremist view than liberal and Marxist feminists. Radical feminists argue that women are oppressed by the patriarchal system that is “characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition, a system that cannot be reformed but only ripped out root and branch” (Tong, 1989, pp. 2-3). Further, radical feminists frequently focus on how issues of sexuality (e.g., rape, pornography, sexual domination) and female biology (e.g., abortion, birth control, forced sterilization) affect women’s identity, social status and function in society.

Psychoanalytic feminists share an interest in issues of female sexuality, yet argue from a Freudian approach that a woman’s oppression originates from deep within her psyche because she allows herself to be ruled by men and she fears the power of her sexuality (Tong, 1989). In contrast, the existentialist branch of feminism argues that the oppression of women originates from outside of a woman. That is, women are oppressed because a patriarchal society considers women as something “other” (p. 6) than being men. Men are free to determine the meaning of their existence, but women

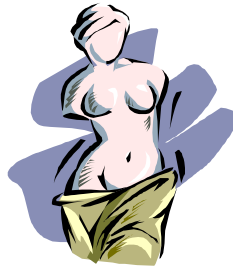
have their existence determined for them. The only way a woman can break free from oppression is by constructing a ‘self’ that is separate from the social labels that limit her existence.

Socialist feminists work to weave together the liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, and existentialist approaches (Tong, 1989). Those who adopt this branch of feminism claim that women’s full liberation will be achieved only when all of the social structures addressed by these approaches to feminism are changed. In contrast, postmodern feminists argue that women’s social experiences (e.g., ethnicity, social status) vary too much to be grouped under one all-encompassing label of ‘feminism.’ Instead, feminists’ thoughts should be diverse and varied to meet the needs of as many women as possible.

Although all the branches of feminism address the oppression of women in society, most literature and research regarding female genitals is approached from the radical feminist perspective. One reason for this is that radical feminism focuses more on issues of sexuality and the biology of the female body (Tong, 1989). However, some liberal feminists have contributed to our knowledge about female genitals, particularly in areas of this topic that relate to women and men having equal access to “educational opportunities” (p. 2) in various social resources (e.g., film, art, literature). Since the topic of female genitals is explored predominantly in radical feminist literature and research and to a smaller extent from a liberal feminist perspective, the resources that I draw upon for my thesis come from these two branches of feminism.

APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT POSTER

A Woman's Perspective



A study exploring women's thoughts and feeling of the female body, most notably the genitals.

You are invited to participate in this study if you are a woman of any ethnicity, sexual orientation, sexual experience, and/or parental status who is 18 years or older.

Participants will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire as well as participate in a focus group for a total time commitment of approximately 1½ - 2 hours.

For more information about this study, please contact:

Shannon Ellis

Department of Psychology

University of Saskatchewan

E-mail: shannon.ellis@usask.ca

Beverages and snacks will be provided.

As well, participants will receive a \$10 gift certificate

for McNally Robinson Bookstore.

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “Exploring Women’s Constructed Meaning for their Bodies.” **Please read this form carefully**, and feel free to ask any questions you might have.

Researchers:

Supervising Researcher: Dr. Linda McMullen
Head, Department of Psychology
University of Saskatchewan
(306) 966-6666
E-mail: linda.mcmullen@usask.ca

Principal Investigator: Shannon R. Ellis
Applied Social Psychology Masters Candidate
(306) 966-6657
E-mail: shannon.ellis@usask.ca

Purpose and Procedure: The purpose of the present study is to gain a better understanding of women’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs (i.e., constructed meaning) for their bodies, in particular, their genitals and how this meaning is understood to influence their interactions with other people. The focus group will be held in a private room made available by the department of psychology at the University of Saskatchewan. The total time for participation in the questionnaire/focus group will be approximately 2 hours.

Potential Risks: There is no documented evidence that sexological research of this nature has any potential risks in terms of participants’ psychological and/or physical well-being. However, if you have any concerns about your participation in this study,

please do not hesitate to contact either Dr. Linda McMullen or Shannon Ellis at the contact numbers listed above. If your involvement in this research triggers any emotions and/or cognitions that you wish to explore with a counsellor, please contact Student Counselling Services at (306) 966-4920 (104 Qu'Appelle Hall Addition) if you are a University of Saskatchewan student. If you are not a registered student of the university you may contact the Mental Health Services-Saskatoon District Health at (306) 655-7950 (715 Queen Street).

Potential Benefits: The information collected in the present study will be used to educate researchers and healthcare professionals. Future research based on the premise of the present study also may promote more widespread education initiatives.

Storage of Data: There will be no personally identifying information collected on the demographic sheet or in the focus group transcripts. All data will be stored in a locked cabinet in Dr. Linda McMullen's office in the Department of Psychology for a period of no less than five years, at which time the data will be destroyed.

Confidentiality: The information that is gathered in this study through demographic sheets and focus groups **WILL BE KEPT STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL**. As well, to protect your confidentiality neither your name nor any other identifying information will appear on the demographic sheet or within the transcript. Although the data collected in this study may be presented at research conferences and/or submitted for publication in academic journals, all information will be presented in aggregate or group form and no identifying information will accompany any direct quotes.

Potential Risks to Confidentiality: Due to the nature of data collection from a focus group, there are limits to which the researcher, Shannon Ellis, can ensure the confidentiality of the information shared during the group session. For this reason,

should you voluntarily choose to sign this consent form you will be acknowledging your responsibility and agreement to protect the integrity and confidentiality of what others in the group say during the research session. Also, as the researcher, Shannon Ellis cannot guarantee your confidentiality, nor will I be responsible for any breaches in confidentiality that result from other participants in this focus group. The researcher, Shannon Ellis, can ensure confidentiality for the transcription of the focus group by referring to all individuals involved in the focus group by an unrelated initial throughout the text and no identifying information will accompany the direct quotes used in the final manuscript.

Group Atmosphere: To provide a positive atmosphere for everyone involved in the focus group, it is imperative that all participants understand that the focus group is a non-judgmental, safe environment in which everyone can express their views without fear of criticism or ridicule.

Right to Withdraw: You may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort and without loss of relevant entitlements and without losing access to relevant services. Should you choose to withdraw, all the information you provided would be completely destroyed. In addition, you may omit any items you wish on the demographic sheet or refrain from providing any information during the focus group without penalty or consequence.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning this study, please feel free to ask them either during the research session or at a later date. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board on February 24, 2006. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to those committees through the Office of Research Services (306)

966-2084. Upon request, a report outlining the major findings of this study will be available to participants. Please contact Shannon Ellis for additional information.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description provided above; I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my concerns have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above; understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time and all information provided by me will be completely destroyed. A copy of this form has been given to me for my records.

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Researcher)

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET

For these questions, please **CIRCLE** the appropriate answer or **FILL IN THE BLANK** with the appropriate information.

1. How old are you? _____ years
2. Do you consider yourself to be:
 - a. married
 - b. common-law
 - c. exclusively dating
 - d. single
3. What ethnicity do you self-identify with? _____
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

5. What is your current occupation? (If you are currently between positions, what was your most recent occupation?)

6. Have you visually examined your genital area on more than one occasion?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
7. Do you discuss female genital-related information with other people?
 - a. yes
 - b. no

If you answered **YES** to Question #7, please continue with Question #8.

If you answered **NO** to Question #7, thank you for taking the time to complete this sheet.

8. How often do you discuss female genital-related information?

9. Who do you discuss female genital-related information with?

Thank you very much for assisting with this research!

APPENDIX D

DISCUSSION TOPICS

The purpose of today's group is to give you an opportunity to discuss your thoughts, feelings, and practices regarding female genitals. Below are some general ideas to discuss. Please feel free to expand on any of these ideas, or add other ones as they relate to you, people you know, or information you've heard.

1. What comes to mind when you think of female genitals?
 - a. (Prompt) What feelings are associated with those thoughts?
 - b. (Prompt) What practices are associated with those thoughts?
 - c. (Prompt) How comfortable are you with these thoughts/feelings/practices?
2. What sorts of things influence your thoughts, feelings, and/or practices regarding female genitals?
 - a. (Prompt) What influence does the media have (e.g., books, magazines, television shows, movies, the Internet), the education system, the medical industry, government policies, family, friends, acquaintances, strangers?
 - b. (Prompt) How do you think Canadian society influences your thoughts/feelings/practices?
 - c. (Prompt) Is there a moral value associated with female genitals in Canadian society?
 - i. (Prompt) If so, what is it?
 - ii. (Prompt) What influence do you think this moral value has on women in Canadian society?
 - iii. (Prompt) What influence does this moral value have on you?

3. How do you think the function of female genitals is portrayed in Canadian society?
 - a. (Prompt) What things in Canadian society influence how the function of female genitals is portrayed?
 - i. (Prompt) What part does the medical/healthcare industry have?
 - ii. (Prompt) What part does the media have?
 - iii. (Prompt) What part does the government/political policy makers have?
 - iv. (Prompt) What part does the education system have?
4. How do your thoughts, feelings, and practices regarding female genitals influence how you interact with other people in your life?

APPENDIX E
DEBRIEFING SHEET

Research in the area of women's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (i.e., constructed meaning) about their genitals is limited. The purpose of this study is to offer a diverse group of women a forum in which to discuss their meaning for their genitals and how this meaning is understood to influence their interactions with other people. The information gathered will be examined by the researcher and made available to professional researchers, and healthcare professionals, to aid them in understanding women's constructed meaning for this, often misunderstood, part of their bodies.

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, it is important that **all** participants treat the subject matter with respect and sensitivity. Should you experience any emotional and/or psychological concerns as a result of participating in this study; the following contact numbers have been provided:

Student Help Centre (offers peer support at the University of Saskatchewan:

Art Tunnel: 966-6981

Student Counselling Centre: Qu'Appelle Hall Addition at the University of

Saskatchewan: 966-4920

Mobile Crisis Unit: 933-6200

Mental Health Services-Saskatoon District Health at 715 Queen Street: 655-7950

Sexual Assault Crisis Line: 244-2224

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Ally Centre:

Memorial Union Building: 966-6615

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your participation in this study, please do not hesitate to contact Shannon Ellis, Department of Psychology, 966-6657 or Dr. Linda McMullen, Department of Psychology, 966-6666.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY!!!!

APPENDIX F

TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION

[...]	Material deliberately omitted
...	A short pause
?	Rising inflection at the end of a phrase
<i>(text)</i>	An interruption that did not lead to a shift in speaker
TEXT	Capitalized words indicate emphasis by the speaker
[text]	Clarifying information added
!	Something stated as being remarkable
'text'	Speaker talking from another person's perspective
text-text	Same word or words repeated in succession