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(DE)CONSTRUCTING SEXUALITY AND VIRGINITY
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SLIDKRANS IN
SWEDEN

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes how the Swedish organization *Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning* (in English, Swedish Association for Sexuality Education) constructs sexuality through the introduction of the word *slidkrans*. The word *slidkrans* (vaginal corona in English), was formally introduced by RFSU in 2009 as a replacement for the word for the hymen, *mödomshinna*, which literally means “virginity membrane.” Aside from the main research question of how RFSU attempts to construct sexuality through the introduction of the word *slidkrans*, auxiliary research questions explore what sexuality the introduction of this word was intended to construct in Sweden, the word’s resonance with sexual educators as well as the sexual educators experience teaching about *slidkrans*.

The thesis uses feminist collaborative anthropological research tools, including ethnography. The researchers’ own backgrounds are central to the research; one researcher provides a more emic perspective while the other provides a more etic perspective. The primary material for this thesis is depth interviews with nine RFSU personnel in Stockholm and Malmö, including sexual educators. The analytical framework draws from previous anthropological research in sexuality concerning virginity and purity as well as Foucault’s insights on sexuality.

The themes of language, education, the Other and silence, are used for the analysis in order to explore the construction of sexuality. In regards to language, *slidkrans* is an example of how language can affect sexuality. Education is a formal arena in which sexuality is constructed. RFSU attempts to redefine virginity in order to redefine concepts of prestige and purity among young people. When virginity becomes individualized then concepts of purity and prestige lose their power over the individual. The Other’s sexuality was the catalyst for the introduction of the word *slidkrans* yet does not stigmatize the Other’s sexuality. The word *slidkrans* and the concepts associated with it can be silencing if not used in a sensitive manner.

KEYWORDS: *feminist anthropology, sexuality, virginity, language, education, Other, silence*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCING SLIDKRANS

Sexuality and virginity are concepts that have been contested for centuries. Currently both sexuality and virginity are important talking points in numerous countries working on curriculum for sexual education programs. *Riksförbundet för Sexuell Upplysning* (RFSU, known in English as the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education) is one of many groups contributing to this dialogue. In 2009, RFSU renamed the hymen in an effort to correct a long-running misnomer for female anatomy. The new word is *slidkrans*, which has been translated in English to vaginal corona, a more accurate and descriptive term to refer to the area 1-2 centimeters inside a vagina.¹ The word *slidkrans* is a conjunction of *slida*, meaning vagina,² and *krans*, meaning a kind of ring or wreath.³ The word emphasizes the hymen is not a membrane which covers the vagina and is punctured upon first vaginal penetration; instead, it can have many shapes and is elastic in nature.

The word *slidkrans* was introduced by RFSU to the Swedish press May 5, 2009. With the announcement came a 24-page booklet called *Vaginal Corona - Myths Surrounding Virginity – Your Questions Answered* (or in Swedish: *Slidkransen: Frågor, svar och myter kring mödom och oskuld*) containing a discussion about the myth and the facts relating to *slidkrans* and illustrated examples of what it may look like. Information for the booklet was produced through a collaboration between a midwife and sexual counselor, who have firsthand experience how myths around the hymen can impact a woman's sexuality.⁴ Available free of charge, the booklet can be requested through RFSU's website or downloaded as a PDF. Within a week of the announcement, all 5,000 copies of the booklet were requested.⁵ After much demand,

¹ RFSU 2009; Magnusson 2009

² Malmström et al 2007, 539

³ Ibid, 304

⁴ RFSU 2009, Ny RFSU-skrift skrotar myten om mödomshinnan: Slidkrans heter det!

⁵ RFSU 2009, 5000 broschyrer redan slut: Slidkransen en succé!

within six months the booklet was translated into English, Arabic and Sorani (Kurdish language spoken primarily in Iran and Iraq), each with a new name for the hymen, with plans for future translations.⁶ A member of RFSU's governing board regarded the translations as a step in the right direction, seeing as these languages were spoken in Sweden, and saw hope for spreading the word abroad.⁷ RFSU's General Secretary, Åsa Regnér, claimed the original brochure was directed toward people in Sweden and international attention that followed came as a welcome surprise.⁸ English language news and feminist websites noted the newly coined term, which the Swedish Language Council, Språkrådet, quickly embraced the new word.⁹

As part of their educational campaign, RFSU is bringing this new term not only into the classroom for discussion, but also introducing the word to newly-arrived immigrants and spreading it through other outlets. In this thesis, we will examine the construction of sexuality in Sweden from a feminist anthropological perspective. To do this, we will draw upon various resources related to sexuality and virginity. These sources include the booklet that introduced *slidkrans* in Sweden, information gathered during interviews with individuals who work directly with disseminating the word *slidkrans* and relevant anthropological, medical and historical materials.

1.2 PROBLEM FORMULATION AND AIM

During the past century, sexuality has become a crucial part of much social science research. Through these various attempts to define and explain it, sexuality has become even more of an enigma.¹⁰ Within the social sciences, anthropological research has looked at the ways different cultures understand and explain sexuality.¹¹ Virginity is frequently a part of these anthropological discussions. With this history in mind, we choose to focus on RFSU's recent introduction of the word *slidkrans* and

⁶ RFSU 2009, Slidkransen äntligen översatt till flera språk

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ RFSU 2009, Stor framgång för RFSU:s sexualpolitiska arbete: "Slidkrans" årets nyord 2009

⁹ Språkrådet 2009

¹⁰ Weeks 2010, 1

¹¹ See MacCormack and Strathern 1980

how this word directly intersects with the Swedish understanding of sexuality. As knowledge related to sexuality and sexual health continues to grow, it is important to contextualize this knowledge and consider how it effects change. The shift that *slidkrans* prompts in the Swedish understanding of sexuality will be the basis of examination in this thesis.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For this thesis we have one primary research question and three auxiliary questions. The auxiliary questions allow for a deeper analysis of various intersecting topics covered by the broader primary question. All of the questions are outlined below.

Primary Research Question:

How does RFSU construct their version of sexuality through the introduction of the word *slidkrans*?

Auxiliary Questions:

- * What sexuality is RFSU constructing in Sweden through the introduction and spreading of the word *slidkrans*?
- * What are the implications of changing the name of the hymen to *slidkrans* on sexuality construction in Sweden?
- * In what ways does *slidkrans* resonate with sex educators and how do the sex educators feel that *slidkrans* resonates with their students?

1.4 CONTEXT OF THE FIELD: A SHORT HISTORY OF RFSU

In order to understand the context of the field, we will offer a brief history of RFSU for those possibly unfamiliar with the organization and its role in Sweden. The only person who has written academically about the early history of RFSU is Lena Lennerhed. It should be noted Lennerhed is currently president of RFSU and a professor of the history of ideas who has drawn upon RFSU's archive for her recounting of its history. She has written dozens of articles dealing with sexuality.

The other source we have relied on for the later history of RFSU is Erik Centerwall, who has contributed to many books about sexuality. This section concludes with a discussion of RFSU's activities today, which are relevant in regards to the introduction of the word *slidkrans*.

RFSU has been an important influence on opinions and policies dealing with sexuality and sexual education in Sweden for over a century, according to Lennerhed. The organization was formed in 1933 as a result of changing attitudes toward sexual education. The general push toward sexual education began to manifest itself in the 1900s in Sweden. Karolina Widerström, Sweden's first female doctor, carried out the first organized sexual education in the early 1900s at all-girls schools.¹² At this time girls were seen as in need for sexual education in order to protect them from boys, who were seen as having a more powerful sexual drive.¹³ Centerwall notes an ambivalence in the 1900s surrounding sexual education: While people were generally in support of sexual education, they didn't want children to see it as an invitation to have sex themselves.¹⁴ This attitude would slowly start to change two decades later. In the 1920s, people in Sweden began to view sex as in terms of enjoyment.¹⁵ During this change toward a more positive climate surrounding sexuality, RFSU was formed.

At RFSU's first annual meeting in 1934, the first program goal was the "introduction of sexual education in Sweden's schools, training colleges and universities."¹⁶ Sixty-eight other program goals covered issues like the establishment of information bureaus, cost-free contraceptives, the right to abortion and sterilization and changing the law concerning people with other sexual drives (which at that time referred to homosexuals). Although RFSU had radical roots, the organization chose to remain non-partisan in order to unify different working-class movements.¹⁷ While RFSU's economic situation was quite dire during the first few years, the rate of

¹² Centerwall 2005, 29

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*, 28

¹⁵ Centerwall 2005, 30

¹⁶ Lennerhed 2002, 68

¹⁷ *ibid*

expansion was enormous. By 1940, RFSU had 65,000 members and dozens of local offices throughout Sweden.¹⁸

In Stockholm, RFSU opened an information bureau where people could ask doctors questions via mail about abortion options, infertility, contraception and much more. Most of the questions via mail came from working class people in the countryside.¹⁹ RFSU's information bureaus received more visitors than those run by local governments; this could be due to the fact that RFSU was well-known or the belief that they were trustworthy.²⁰

One of RFSU's main issues during their early years was abortion. RFSU pushed for the legalization of abortion and increased access to preventative measures such as sexual education and contraceptives. The organization also wished to destigmatize abortion.²¹ RFSU funded their organization through the selling of contraceptive devices (including diaphragms manufactured in their own laboratory) and pregnancy tests.²² This economic branch of RFSU continues today, although the range of products has expanded.

Although RFSU's first official program point stressed the need for sexual education, the issue was not thoroughly addressed until the 1940s.²³ RFSU was not alone in stressing the importance of sexual education. Many other organizations, including many school organizations, also pushed for the teaching of "sexual hygiene" in schools.²⁴ A royal announcement in 1942 that recommended the teaching of sexual education in schools was welcomed by RFSU.²⁵

The early years of sexual education emphasized what was thought of as the natural progression of "love-marriage-children." This left little room for discussion of

¹⁸ *ibid*, 69

¹⁹ *ibid*, 70

²⁰ *ibid*, 71

²¹ *ibid*, 96

²² *ibid*, 72

²³ Lennerhed 2002, 126

²⁴ *Ibid*, 126

²⁵ *ibid*

how intercourse was carried out, physical anatomy and many other subjects; instead, abstinence before marriage was seen as the correct path for all students.²⁶ The Christian church and RFSU soon came to butt heads. RFSU felt a relationship without marriage was just as valid and meaningful as one within the confines of marriage.²⁷ There was a secret boycott against doctors and teachers associated with RFSU thought to have been arranged by clergy members, doctors and teachers.²⁸ Lennerhed approaches the conflict regarding sexual education as a battle between traditional Christian morals on one side and RFSU, backed by medicine, psychology and sociology on the other side.²⁹

RFSU's stance on homosexuality was never clearly defined and went through many changes in the early years. During the 1940s, RFSU received many letters about people who had questions about their own sexuality.³⁰ In response to these letters, RFSU explained the latest scientific data regarding homosexuality, copied shorter essays, gave suggestions for further reading and could even give information on where to come into contact with other homosexuals in Stockholm (one of the few meeting points of homosexuals).³¹ Later, RFSU began to demand a change in the law regarding the criminalization of homosexuality.³² RFSU regarded homosexuality as a "variant," which Lennerhed interprets as meaning that homosexuality was inborn, although at times homosexuality was regarded by RFSU as an illness, which demonstrates a large amount of confusion surrounding the subject at that time.³³

A change in Sweden's society following World War II led to a social climate that welcomed sexual reform and a government that embraced many of RFSU's suggestions.³⁴ In 1945, a Gallup poll in Sweden revealed less than a quarter of

²⁶ *ibid*, 127

²⁷ *ibid*, 133

²⁸ *ibid*, 137

²⁹ *ibid*, 140

³⁰ *ibid*, 160

³¹ *ibid*, 161

³² Lennerhed 2002, 162

³³ *ibid*, 167

³⁴ *ibid*, 184

respondents felt abstinence was important before marriage, probably because the same poll showed that “95% of Swedish men had experience with sex before marriage.”³⁵

In 1955, Sweden became the first country in the world to make sexual education mandatory in public schools.³⁶ Still, the royal directive in 1956 stated “education must seriously uphold the understanding that abstinence from sexual relations during childhood and adolescence is the only way the school, with good conscience, can recommend.”³⁷

The 1960s saw a wave of sexual liberalism. The ban on pornography was scrapped and new demands were made for abortion rights, which led to eventual change in law in 1974.³⁸ In the 1970s, RFSU selected the disabled, immigrants and institutionalized persons as their new target groups.³⁹ Amongst a more positive and accepting climate toward homosexuals, in 1979 RFSU encouraged Sweden’s National Board of Health to remove homosexuality from its list of illnesses.⁴⁰

A new sexual education directive was issued in 1977, wherein sexual education was advised to take a more broad approach and include information about relationships.⁴¹ Equality, democracy and objectivity were emphasized and the moralization of sexuality slowly removed.⁴² When the spread of HIV and AIDS began in the early 1980s, “sex education became literally a question of life and death.”⁴³ The AIDS epidemic lead RFSU to concentrate on prevention and disseminating information as well as “an increased focus on homosexual rights.”⁴⁴

³⁵ Centerwall 2005, 32

³⁶ Lennerhed 2002, 141

³⁷ Centerwall 2005, 37

³⁸ Lennerhed 2002, 195

³⁹ *ibid*, 197

⁴⁰ *ibid*

⁴¹ Centerwall 2005, 41

⁴² *ibid*, 44

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ Lennerhed 2002, 197

Sexual education in the 1990s was characterized by its emphasis on sexual violence, inequality between the sexes and the use of sexist language.⁴⁵

Today, RFSU has dozens of local groups throughout Sweden. RFSU arranges courses, conferences, study groups, debates and more. RFSU trains sexual educators who visit schools to educate students and add to the dialogue around sexuality. RFSU has ongoing collaborations with SIDA, the Swedish International Development Agency. RFSU also runs several sexual health clinics that can take patients with psychological and physical concerns.⁴⁶ The RFSU Congress is the organization's supreme decision-making authority. At the Congress, members of the organization elect members of the board.⁴⁷ Each RFSU local group also has a board. RFSU's activities are generally self-funded. Currently, RFSU owns 40% of ETAC, a company that manufactures products for those with limited mobility and 100% of RFSU Ltd, which produces condoms, sexual aids, pregnancy tests, intimate personal care products and more, earning about 120 million SEK a year. Surplus sales from RFSU Ltd's products are used to support the organization RFSU.⁴⁸

This historical overview demonstrates the steady rise of confidence placed in the organization by Swedish society regarding the quality of information and services provided by RFSU. While RFSU has faced controversies in recent times,⁴⁹ these conflicts centered mostly around sexual education in schools.

RFSU's popularity in Swedish society can explain why the organization has a history of introducing new words into the national lexicon with a high degree of success. In 2003 the new word for girls' genitals, *snippa*, was introduced into Swedish to address a need for a word for young girls' genitals that matched the masculine equivalent, *snopp*. It was necessary to find a new word that was not loaded

⁴⁵ Skolverket 1999, 54

⁴⁶ RFSU 2009. Kort om RFSU-förbundet

⁴⁷ RFSU 2009. Förbundsstyrelse

⁴⁸ RFSU 2009. RFSU AB

⁴⁹ for examples of this one can look to philosopher Roland Poirier Martinsson's accusations of RFSU teaching young children about anal sex . See Martinsson 2009, Skytte 2009 and RFSU's reponse in RFSU 2009. Debatt: Vi pratar sex med ungdomar – utifrån deras verklighet

and or carried undertones of shame (like “down there”) or sexism (like “cunt”) that could be used by daycare and preschool workers. Some schools have even instituted the use of the word.⁵⁰ The word *slidkrans*, followed this trail of success.

1.5 DISPOSITION OF THESIS

This thesis is divided into six chapters, which have been organized as follows: The succeeding chapter on methodology includes discussions of feminist ethnography, collaborative ethnography, the autobiographical element, this thesis’ division of labor, the selected participants, translation within the thesis, transcription of interviews, informed participant consent and participant anonymity and confidentiality. Tied to the analysis, the third chapter frames our theoretical approach to sexuality, including an examination of the anthropological understandings of sex and sexuality, feminist anthropology and how prestige and purity are related to virginity. The fourth chapter summarizes the context of the change to *slidkrans* and encompasses a review of relevant literature, including an outline of medical literature related to the hymen and a discussion of virginity as the domain of the Other in Sweden. The analysis chapter is comprised of four sections: power of language, education, the Other and silence. Chapter six concludes the thesis.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore the anthropological methodology we employed for our research area and how it was applied. The first section deals largely with feminist and collaborative ethnography. We have provided a discussion of these two types of ethnographies and how they interact with each other in order to create more enriched and informed research. We have also included an autobiographical component in an attempt to explain our positions as researchers and reflect upon how our backgrounds,

⁵⁰ Lagerblad 2007

attitudes and understandings may affect the research. The division of labor between the co-researchers is outlined in this section. This section also deals with language issues, specifically translation, in the cross-cultural context. The second section explores how our methods were used in the field by detailing our choice of participants as well as outlining the ethical issues we faced. This section also includes a discussion of confidentiality and researcher ethics. The third section contains details about how the interviews were conducted and a discussion of transcription within the anthropological context.

2.1.1 FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY

It is nearly impossible to find an acceptable definition of feminism due to the history and nuances of the concept. For our purposes, we define feminism as the struggle for the social, economic and political equality of men and women, regardless of skin color or social status. We see gender as constructed rather than biological, meaning men and women are produced into men and women rather than biology determining the behavior of men and women.⁵¹ Ethnography grapples with the description of groups/cultures and requires an open mind (while still allowing “insiders” a say as well), an emic as well as etic perspective (which will be explored in the next section) and an approach that pays attention to symbols within the group/culture.⁵² While our discussion of the construction of sexuality does not encompass an entire ethnography, it certainly delves into facets of Swedish culture in the same sense that an ethnography does.

Early feminist ethnographies explored the meanings of sex, gender and women’s place in society. Feminist ethnographies have also attempted to give a voice to women in a particular society and explored power and autonomy as well as women’s relations to men. More recent feminist ethnographies have been informed by Judith Butler’s understanding of sex/gender and performativity and pushed for

⁵¹ This kind of feminism can be best defined by post-colonial feminist Mohanty's understanding of feminism, see Mohanty (2003)

⁵² Fetterman 2008

different forms of ethnography, including playwriting and autobiographical narratives.⁵³ Famous feminist ethnographies have been authored by Gayle Rubin, Laura Bohannon and Michelle Rosaldo. Although many feminist ethnographies make use of only female participants and a research field that is primarily occupied by women, feminist ethnography does in no way exclude using both male and female participants.⁵⁴

Kamala Visweswaran, an anthropologist based in the USA, defines feminist ethnography as “ethnography that foregrounds the question of social inequality vis-à-vis the lives of men, women, and children.”⁵⁵ She further argues the definition of feminist ethnography should be expanded to encompass a larger area of study: “women should not be seen as sole subjects, authors, or audiences of feminist ethnography. Various forms of critical ethnography might thus productively be read as feminist ethnography.”⁵⁶

While the co-researchers of this paper are female and identify as feminists, the subjects and audiences are not limited to women-identified individuals who identify as feminists. We see our research as feminist ethnography due to the methodology we have employed, which will be discussed below, as well as how sexuality has been explored.

2.1.2 COLLABORATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

While much anthropological research has been done by individual researchers, a new push for collaboration and specifically, collaborative ethnography, began in the 1970s with roots in the Chicago School of Anthropology. Collaborative ethnology arose as a critique of the traditional view of the role of the researcher as a singular, academic voice studying the Other. The Other is a concept used by Simone de Beauvoir to refer to women (who can be regarded as the Other in opposition to men,

⁵³ Visweswaran 1997

⁵⁴ Reinharz and Davidman 1992, 55

⁵⁵ Visweswaran 1997, 593

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 593-594

who were the standard gender).⁵⁷ Edward Said's breakthrough work *Orientalism* went on to apply the concept of the Other to colonized, exotified people, which stood in stark contrast to those in the West.⁵⁸ For the purposes of our research, the use of the Other in this paper will be based upon this post-colonial understanding.

In many traditional ethnographies, the Other had no control over what the singular researcher wrote and how the researcher portrayed the culture, which led to a one-sided representation of the culture being studied and a lack of agency on the part of the Other.⁵⁹ Even by giving participants voices, many anthropologists failed in representing the cultures being studied. As James Clifford writes, "Polyvocality was restrained and orchestrated in traditional ethnographies by giving to one voice a pervasive authorial function and to others the role of sources, 'participants,' to be quoted or paraphrased. Once dialogism and polyphony are recognized as modes of textual production, monophonic authority is questioned, revealed to be characteristic of a science that has claimed to *represent* cultures."⁶⁰

The goal of collaborative ethnography is to better understand the culture being analyzed through the use of polyvocality. Concepts of agency, power and representation are crucial to collaborative ethnography, and these concepts overlap with feminist ethnography, in that certain voices are given a setting to be heard. With collaborative ethnography, the community being studied has a voice—a say in what is being discussed and written about them and how they are represented.

Collaborative research also stresses how the relationship of the co-researchers can better the final research product: "Although it can involve many types of alliances, common goals and mutuality are integral to collaborative research—a sense that each partner has much to learn from the other and that the results of the research

⁵⁷ See de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1989) for her discussion on woman as the Other

⁵⁸ Said 1979

⁵⁹ Lassiter 2005

⁶⁰ Clifford 1986, 15

will be richer through collaboration than any one partner could achieve without the other.’’⁶¹

In our collaborative research project, we do not engage in “traditional” collaborative ethnology. Instead, we have two researchers from different backgrounds, one of whom has partial insider status and acts as the gatekeeper and the other co-researcher who has an etic perspective. There are many justifications for having a gatekeeper as a co-researcher; as Pushor (2008) succinctly writes:

Because collaborative research is typically conducted in a field setting with practitioners, the knowledge developed is already integral to practice rather than separated from it. Having co-researchers who are authentically inside the experience—co-researchers who have explored it and understand it from the inside—voids this concern with the research–practice divide. Creating a collaborative research team, a team that represents multiple viewpoints and voices as well as differing positions in relation to the research puzzle, makes the research richer and more complex and pushes the inquiry deeper.

While traditional collaborative ethnology involves more than two researchers, limiting factors inside our research, including funding and access, as well as the nature of the project, kept the number of co-researchers at two. The limited number of co-researchers speeds the planning process and time spent in the field. Collaborative ethnology does have its particular challenges which singular researchers may not face. Collaborative ethnology demands the mutual respect of the co-researchers, requires extensive discussions, meetings and compromises.⁶² The relationship of the co-researchers plays a central role in the ethnography and trust and equity are required.⁶³

By employing collaboration as a tool within our research, we created many goals for our research, including gaining better access to the field, making better use of our resources and time and performing richer research. We feel these goals were met during the research process. By having one researcher take the gatekeeper role, we were able to gain better access to the field. Lynn Nylander’s experience with

⁶¹ Pushor 2008

⁶² Pushor 2008

⁶³ *ibid*

RFSU and language skills were used to create an ethnography that is better informed than what an individual researcher without contacts and without Swedish language ability could conduct. In particular, Lynn was able to use her local contacts in Malmö to quickly find interview subjects. Her Swedish language skills were used to create a literature review that is informed by research being done in Sweden. Most importantly, Lynn has used her own experiences as an RFSU sexual educator in what can arguably be called autoethnography. Carolyn Ellis, who specializes in autoethnography, states, "In autoethnography, the life of the researcher becomes a conscious part of what is studied."⁶⁴ Anthropologist Colic-Peisker, who studied Croatian immigrant communities in Australia (herself being a Croatian immigrant in Australia) and employed autoethnography as a tool in her research, writes, "Using our holistic selves in ethnography is not only a rewarding social experience but, fortunately, is increasingly acknowledged among social researchers as a legitimate scholarly approach."⁶⁵ While interviews with RFSU participants make up the bulk of the research material, Lynn's experiences with sexual education in Sweden have not been excluded and have informed and colored many parts of the ethnography. There are, of course, negative aspects to having an emic perspective. Colic-Peisker noted that "the problem with being a 'native anthropologist' can be one of gaining sufficient distance."⁶⁶ By employing collaborative research, we hoped to counteract this effect.

Still, it is important to note how researcher roles are not fixed. Lynn's role as a co-researcher was not always as gatekeeper; identification as an insider or outsider changed depending on the research field and interview subject. Rachel was able to obtain and conduct interviews in Stockholm with the RFSU head office without Lynn's presence.

As co-researchers, we were also able to make better use of our resources and time. This particular project had no outside funding. All travel was made at the

⁶⁴ Ellis 2008

⁶⁵ Colic-Peisker 2004

⁶⁶ Colic-Peisker 2004

expense of the co-researchers themselves. Because of our limited economic resources as students, only Rachel was able to conduct interviews in Stockholm. We were also able to conduct just two interviews concurrently as the interviewee's schedules collided with each other's. By having two co-researchers, we were able to reach more people and conduct more research than a sole researcher.

By using collaboration in our research process, we have also performed richer research. By having two co-researchers, one with a more emic perspective and the other with an etic perspective, our research has been informed by different viewpoints and experiences that have enriched the ethnography's quality. Our research has been informed by our different statuses within the field and our collaboration has fostered a better understanding of the construction of sexuality in Sweden. Interviews were conducted both in Swedish and English, which has led to an interesting discussion regarding the insider/outsider role, which we will expand upon later. We will also expand on our own backgrounds in a further sub-section in an attempt to explain how they may have affected our research.

2.1.3 POSITIONING OURSELVES: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT

The autobiographical element is a relatively new phenomenon within anthropological research which is a reaction against positivist thinking in the field. Traditional ethnographies have been criticized for excluding the anthropologist, many which have the naïve presumption that the anthropologist and her/his background does not affect the research. Feminists in particular have been critical toward research which does not specifically comment on the researcher's background. As Judith Okely, a feminist anthropologist based in the U.K., writes, "...whether through scientific (sic) or sexist bias, the personal is often denigrated in anthropological monographs. The 'I' of the observer sometimes disappears altogether as though the material was acquired by impersonal procedures."⁶⁷ Ethnographies are personal due to the nature of relationships within the community. It is necessary to expand upon

⁶⁷ Okely 1996, 30

the researcher and what she or he brings to the table, because "... the 'race,' nationality, gender, age and personal history of the fieldworker affect the process, interaction and emergent material."⁶⁸ As feminist researchers, we recognize our understandings, attitudes, viewpoints and experiences affect the research process and especially how we interact with participants.

It is also necessary to know whether the researcher identifies as an insider or outsider. As sociologist Mark Sherry writes,

Many academic disciplines encourage researchers to be reflective about their relationships with research participants, but emphasis on whether a researcher identifies as an insider or an outsider has been a particular focus of qualitative research in the areas of anthropology, feminism, and disability studies. The insider or outsider status of a researcher may have a considerable effect on the research process. For instance, being an insider or outsider may affect the way in which the researcher enters the field, the obligations that the researcher has to research participants, the ongoing nature of contact with research participants, and the level of trust demonstrated by research participants.⁶⁹

As feminist co-researchers we have attempted be reflective about our roles as researchers and how we position ourselves by using an autobiographical component.

2.1.3A POSITIONING OURSELVES: LYNN

I place myself somewhere in the gray area between insider and outsider. Most Swedish people I come into contact with adamantly refuse to see me as an immigrant, although that is exactly what I am. I first moved to Sweden in 2004 to study, left in 2006 to teach English in Japan and moved back to Sweden in 2008. I am a young, able-bodied person who has always identified as female and heterosexual.

Although I first came to Sweden to experience life in a Scandinavian culture, I have come to see Sweden as my home. I can accept what I view as the positive and negative aspects of Swedish society. Most of my friends and new family are here. The

⁶⁸ *ibid*, xi

⁶⁹ Sherry 2008

last time I was in my hometown, much less the United States of America, was in 2006. Since then I have visited eight other countries.

By coming from the West, specifically the USA, as well as having white skin and speaking Swedish, I am often granted insider status. Although few would regard me as a Swede, I am often not seen as an immigrant either. In this sense I occupy a space outside the norm. I cannot vote in Swedish elections, risk having my residency rights revoked should I live in another country (for any amount of time) and I do not receive the same financial benefits as Swedes when it comes to studying. Because I am married to a Swedish citizen, I do have a right to live and work in Sweden.

My interest in sexuality and economic needs led me to RFSU. I had been involved with the organization Projekt Sex, which advances safe sex for students in Lund. I was eventually offered the opportunity to participate in a training course by RFSU in order to become a sex educator. I completed the course in 2009 and have been taking part in various assignments at high schools and at a girl's fair in the Skåne region. RFSU is not my only employer; I also act as a freelance translator, personal assistant and substitute teacher. In 2009 I was accepted into a three semester teaching certification program for the middle and high school levels and have spent some time as a student teacher at a middle school in Lund.

My interest in the word *slidkrans* grew after experiencing a wide range of reactions to the word from young people. Eventually I suggested a collaboration to Rachel. Although I am not a full "insider," I have access to information, contacts and perspectives that might be difficult to access for a person with few Swedish ties. While anthropology does have a history of "participants" and "translators" collaborating with researchers, this project is an equal collaboration and one person's contributions are not seen as superior or more scientific than the other's. Our backgrounds, skills, experiences, knowledge and viewpoints of the world are both valued and put to use in this collaboration.

2.1.3B POSITING OURSELVES: RACHEL

Reflection upon one's position is paramount within any feminist anthropological research and this, briefly, is how I see myself. To begin, I am a visibly Caucasian, Western, relatively young cis-woman. Though I may not appear to be explicitly "non-Swedish" I am quickly discovered to be an outsider due to my inability to speak or understand fluent Swedish at which point it becomes necessary to explain that I grew up in America.

I have been living in Scandinavia (Copenhagen, Lund and now Malmö) on and off for the past five years and I have come to view Scandinavia as my home. I originally moved here as an exchange student in 2004 for a program in Copenhagen. After that first taste of Scandinavia, I returned to Copenhagen in the summer of 2006 for a 15-month long internship and then I began to study full-time at Lund University in 2008. From those previous few sentences one can ascertain that I also identify myself as a student.

My identity as student has evolved since I first came to Scandinavia. I began as an eager anthropologist embarking on my first fieldwork adventure in a foreign land. Maintaining that enthusiasm, I have grown into a more critically aware feminist and researcher who has not "gone native," but can reflect and understand the more intricate details of Swedish society. As a foreign and visiting student, however, the "insiders" view me as transient, temporary and at times glaringly out of place.

During my time studying, working and living in the southern cities of Scandinavia, I have been involved personally and professionally in various sexual and reproductive health questions and situations both with insiders and outsiders. I am a trained sexual educator for Projekt Sex with Lund University and have acted as a mediator for foreign students in Copenhagen, helping them to understand their access and rights to sexual and reproductive health care.

Regardless of the time I have spent living in Scandinavia, my current commitment to stay here (government permitting) and my perceived "Westernness," I

remain an outsider, visitor and immigrant. Working with a researcher partner has provided the opportunity to reflect upon my outsider status, linguistic limitations and “Westernness” as perceived by the participants. This thesis is the sum of both of our experiences and reflections.

2.1.4 DIVISION OF LABOR

It is necessary to explain the division of labor for our collaborative ethnography. We have attempted to make the best use of our resources, labor, time and knowledge/abilities during the research and writing process. In attempt to explain this, we will outline the research process and how the labor was divided among co-researchers.

In February 2010, Rachel and Lynn agreed to use collaborative ethnography to tackle the research subject because both had interests in the same subject and it was decided collaborative ethnography could best address the research question. Rachel was able to obtain and interview three members of the RFSU headquarters in Stockholm on March 31, 2010. Lynn used her contacts to request interviews with RFSU personnel in the Malmö area. Literature was shared and divided up between co-researchers. Lynn primarily read literature written in Swedish and made notes in English. Rachel’s literature focus was primarily on theory. The co-researchers discussed and shared the literature as much as possible to provide a kind of overlap. Each co-researcher made notes in English for the other co-researcher.

Interviews with participants in Malmö were carried out in March and April, which is when the writing of the thesis began. Before embarking on this research project, the co-researchers had experience reading each other’s academic writing and felt the individual writing styles were cohesive enough to allow primary authorship of a particular section without creating large breaks between the sections, which would decrease the readability.

The first chapter was primarily written by Lynn, with the exception of section 1.4 and 1.5. All of section 2.1 (with the exception of 2.1.3b, authored by Rachel) were

written by Lynn, as well as sections 2.2.3, 2.2.4 and 2.3.2. Rachel authored the remaining five sections of Chapter 2. Chapter 3 was predominately written by Rachel, with a brief addition to section 3.4 authored by Lynn. Chapter 4 was written by Lynn. For the analysis chapter, Rachel wrote sections 5, 5.1, and 5.4 while Lynn authored sections 5.2, 5.3 and 5.5. Chapter 6, the conclusion, was primarily authored by Rachel.

It should be noted that while we have outlined which co-researcher should be attributed authorship of a particular section, the writing process was always informed by the other co-researcher. Discussion among co-researchers was central to each aspect of the research process. This included offering suggestions for further reading and editing by including or removing information. Each co-researcher approved the other co-researcher's sections in order to construct a cohesive thesis with a unified voice.

While we have discussed the positive aspects of a collaboration, it should be noted that there are downsides. Each co-researcher was forced to make compromises in the way of the direction the research would take in order to create a unified work. At times there were difficulties deciding on which direction the research would take and how such decisions could be made in an egalitarian, feminist fashion. This required solid line of communication and understanding between the researchers as well as a willingness to compromise. The researchers were also required to work their schedules around each other. This means that a collaborative research project did not offer the flexibility that an individual researcher would have.

2.2 METHODOLOGIES

In this section we will outline the methods used to collect our empirical data. We will begin by arguing for the specific method of collection used, namely semi-structured depth interviews. Next we will explain the details of each interview and how and why each interviewee was selected. Finally, in the third sub-section we will discuss how the dialogue has been created between the co-authors of this thesis.

2.2.1 METHODS: SELECTION AND JUSTIFICATION

Historically, anthropology viewed “the field” as a boundary-defined region, located far from Western societies where a researcher could ethnographically study the Other.⁷⁰ Within the construction of “the field” as far away home it was understood to be a place of origin and sameness.⁷¹ Today, “the field” is no longer as clearly defined as “out there” as fieldwork can be performed at “home.” Globalization and the growing popularity of anthropology at home has forced a change in the theoretical and methodological approaches to fieldwork and the discipline of anthropology.⁷² The lack of appropriate rhetoric and language for reflecting upon and analyzing the new types of projects such as anthropology at home and multi-site fieldwork has been explored by anthropologists such as George Marcus, Ahkil Gupta and James Furguson.⁷³ Today there are many different approaches to fieldwork including, but not limited to, participant observation, interviewing and ethnographic research. For this project we used semi-structured depth interviews to investigate *slidkrans* and its associated discourses in Sweden.

An interview is a way to gather research that allows for the construction of a “listening space” where the researcher and interviewee can verbally exchange and create knowledge points.⁷⁴ It is valuable to note here that from a feminist methodological standpoint, each party, both the interviewer or researcher and interviewee, are active participants in this verbal exchange.⁷⁵ Hence, we will refer to the respective parties as researcher and participant with the understanding that each was active in the production of knowledge during the interview process. During the conversation it is ideal if both participants have equal input and control over the

⁷⁰ McCall 2006, 6

⁷¹ Hume & Mulcock 2004, xxii

⁷² Kurontani 2004, 201

⁷³ *ibid*

⁷⁴ Miller and Crabtree 2004, 185

⁷⁵ Reinharz 1992, 22

discussion; however in practice this ideal of equality might play out differently and the researcher is likely to have more power and control over the final product.

A depth interview focuses on the "...coconstruction of the interviewer's and a [participant's] experience and understanding of the topic of interest and not necessarily on the context of that understanding."⁷⁶ Though Miller and Crabtree, US based medical anthropologists claim the context is not necessary from a feminist perspective, we feel excluding the participants' contextual understanding of the information would weaken research conclusions.⁷⁷ The co-construction of sexuality through language was a primary reason for our selection of this method. A fluid notion of sexuality, understood as a contextually constructed concept, was central to our research (see Chapter 3 for further discussion) and the semi-structured depth interview offered an effective way to examine the understanding, uses and construction of this discourse as it relates to *slidkrans*.

The interview process consists of selecting participants to interview and then engaging with the participants in the interview and co-construction of knowledges. The selection of participants and details relating to each interview will be discussed in the following section. For now let us focus on the interview.

The interview process involves the location and the actual interview. Each of our interviews took place in the proverbial "grass hut," meaning that the location was an everyday setting and not a sterile uncontextualized room.⁷⁸ Though some interviews were held in public café, privacy was maintained by only the involved participants sitting in the area. Prior to each interview, Lynn and Rachel met to compile a list of questions tailored for the individual participants. Each question list began with a series of introductory questions to establish the participant's relationship to the word *slidkrans*. These introductory questions provided context for the participant's knowledge and helped the researcher build a relationship with the

⁷⁶ Miller and Crabtree 2004, 188

⁷⁷ *ibid*

⁷⁸ Werner and Schoepfle in Miller and Crabtree 2004, 194

participant. Once the introductory questions were covered the “grand tour”⁷⁹ questions were presented. These “grand tour” questions were open-ended and used to lead the participant into a discussion of *slidkrans*. These more general questions helped to indicate the participant’s feelings, experiences and expectations associated with *slidkrans* and its associated discourses.⁸⁰ To help clarify any statements made by the participant during these “grand tour” answers and to facilitate flow of the conversation, the researcher added in “category” or “contrast”⁸¹ questions such as: who, what, where, when, why, how did that happen, etc. Additional questions focusing on the participant’s area of expertise were also used to help steer the conversation and were mixed in with the “category” and “contrast” questions.

2.2.2 THE PARTICIPANTS

Our interviews focused on discussions with individuals who are active in fields such as sexual and reproductive health research and education and community youth outreach. These targeted spheres allowed for a knowledgeable and productive conversation to further develop our research on *slidkrans* in Sweden. A total of nine interviews were conducted in April 2010. Our interview participants included: Olle Castelius, RFSU Press Officer; Maria Andersson, RFSU Program Director; Christina Rogala, RFSU International Program Director and Registered Midwife; four RFSU sex educators; Alán Ali, operations manager for the Elektra Project in Malmö and RFSU board member; and Linda Leveau, a sex education coordinator in Malmö.

The first three interviews with Castelius, Andersson and Rogala were handled by Rachel at RFSU’s Stockholm headquarters. Each interview was held in the meeting room and lasted between 30 to 55 minutes. After consultation with the RFSU Malmö Group, and at the advice of the first three participants, we sought contact with Ali at Elektra in Malmö. Ali, we were told, was involved in *slidkrans* discussions by virtue of being a member of the RFSU board. Both Lynn and Rachel were present at

⁷⁹ Miller and Crabtree 2004, 192

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ *ibid*, 193

his interview, which lasted slightly more than two hours and was held in the common room of Fryshuset. The RFSU Stockholm participants also recommended we contact Leveau who works coordinating sexual education curriculums for schools in Malmö. Rachel's interview with her lasted almost an hour and was held at a coffee shop in the center of Malmö.

In addition to our discussions with the professionals, we arranged an open interview time to speak with sexual educators at RFSU Malmö. Due to the participant's time constraints, Lynn interviewed one sexual educator while Rachel spoke with another; each of these conversations lasted between 20 to 35 minutes. We later arranged interviews with one more RFSU sexual educator in Malmö, who we met together at a coffee house at the central train station for an interview lasting a little more than 30 minutes. Finally we spoke to one final sexual educator who Lynn spoke to for 20 minutes at a public building in Malmö. The locations of the interviews were decided upon after consultation with our participants. Lynn's experiences as a sexual educator for RFSU have also made her a participant as well as a co-researcher.

Seven of the nine interviews were held in English with the participants' agreement. At times Swedish words would be substituted by the participants if the English term was unknown. In these cases Rachel and Lynn would review the recording together and discuss the context of the quote and agree upon a translation. All of the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed afterwards. The idea of consent will be discussed in section 2.3.

2.2.3 TRANSLATION

Two of the interviews, both with sexual educators, were conducted in Swedish. As mentioned, those being interviewed in English with both Lynn and Rachel were given the option of speaking Swedish. All of these interviewees agreed to be interviewed in English. At times, Swedish was used to describe a word or concept, which Lynn translated to English. The interviewee verbally confirmed the veracity or debated the interpretation before coming to an agreement and continuing

in English. Most of the literature review and media extracts were in Swedish. All of the excerpts were translated by Lynn.

While many social scientists, including anthropologists, have debated the role of participants and possibilities for collaboration, there has been surprisingly little debate about the range of issues a researcher can encounter when not speaking the native language. As Wong and Poon, two researchers with backgrounds in nursing note, it is often assumed translation and interpretation is neutral, technical procedure that is free from power relations and that the underlying power relations between researchers and translators often go unexplored.⁸² With anthropology taking on new and innovative subject matters, ideally the researcher(s) should be able to understand the language of the culture being studied. We hope having a bilingual researcher can counteract these limitations.

Squires recommends the translation is verified by an independent review.⁸³ Our study has not conducted an independent review of the translations due to economic limitations. Squires also recommends researchers provide the credentials of the translator and/or interpreter because the quality of the translation, coding and data analysis are influenced by the translator/interpreter's sociolinguistic knowledge.⁸⁴ In order to make our research process transparent, it is necessary to discuss the translation process and disclose Lynn's credentials. Lynn first began her Swedish studies in 2004 at Folkuniversitet in Lund, completing *Svenska som andraspråk A* and *Svenska som andraspråk B* (Swedish as a second language A and Swedish as a second language B) at Komvux in Lund. Swedish B is the equivalent of high school Swedish and used as the standard for admission to university programs in Swedish in late 2008. She also completed the course English Grammar and Translation (*ENGB02*, 9 points), a course for Swedish to English translation, at Lund University

⁸² Wong and Poon 2010, 152

⁸³ Squires 2009, 279

⁸⁴ *ibid*, 278

in 2009. She has been the unofficial and later official translator for Projekt Sex in Lund since 2008. She has performed paid translations for children's books and for Lund Municipality. Unless otherwise noted, the translations from Swedish into English in this research project have all been done by Lynn.

2.2.4 *TRANSCRIPTION*

To record our interviews, we used digital audio recording devices. Recording was done on an iPod as well as another digital recording device with the participants' knowledge, as previously discussed. When the co-researchers interviewed together, two recording devices were used to ensure the recording would be successful and to have a back-up in case of mechanical error. The recordings were uploaded onto the co-researchers' computers into .mp3 digital audio files.

Anthropologist Elinor Ochs offers many recommendations in regards to transcripts. She writes "one of the important features of a transcript is that it should not have too much information. A transcript that is too detailed is difficult to follow and assess. A more useful transcript is a selective one."⁸⁵ In the interest of simplicity, we decided against using video equipment and exempted non-verbal communication from the transcripts. Some forms of non-verbal communication were noted by the co-researchers with notations during the interview.

In order to best represent our interviewees, we decided to attempt to transcribe exactly what was being said without altering things that could be considered "mistakes," such as an awkward choice of words or improper grammar. If we had trouble understanding something that was being said, we had a discussion before deciding on a course of action (in almost all cases a co-researcher could confirm what was said). Both researchers agreed to transcribe the interview recording verbatim, including all filler words such as "um" and pauses notated by an ellipsis. Two interviews were performed in Swedish, transcribed in Swedish and then translated into English. The free program Audacity was used to expedite the transcription

⁸⁵ Ochs 1979, 44

process. The public figure participants were given the option of reviewing their transcripts. One participant chose to exercise this option.

2.3 THE ETHICS OF CONSENT, ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Consent, anonymity and confidentiality are topics of discussion whereby ethics plays a crucial role when performing feminist fieldwork. The ethos of feminist postmodernist research requires a reflection on the power relationship between the researcher and the researched. In the following sections, we will explain our research position on informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality.

2.3.1 INFORMED CONSENT

Our primary method of gathering information, the semi-structured depth interview, created clear boundaries between the researchers and the participants. This limited relationship lessened the complications that can arise when reflecting upon informed consent.

Fieldworkers do not have one universalized understanding of informed consent, though now they are bound by university review boards and sponsoring organizations to discuss their research practices related to ethics and consent.⁸⁶ Informed consent is a concept complicated by numerous issues stemming from the very nature of fieldwork. Fieldwork is inherently volatile and a researcher's purpose can shift and change over time, making it difficult for one to fully inform the participants of their intentions.⁸⁷ Additionally, anthropologists are not necessarily always forthcoming or transparent with their research motivations so they can ensure access to the desired community.⁸⁸ The American Anthropology Association's (AAA) Code of Ethics explains the process of informed consent to be "dynamic and continuous" and that informed consent "should be initiated in the project design and continue through implementation by way of dialogue and negotiation with those studied."⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Thorne 2004, 159

⁸⁷ *ibid*, 162

⁸⁸ *ibid*

⁸⁹ American Anthropological Association 1998, 3

Following the Code of Ethics defined by the AAA was simplified by choosing to hold semi-structured depth interviews, as discussed in the previous section. This approach allowed for the researchers to formally contact the interviewees via e-mail to make introductions and clearly state our research intentions with the hope of being granted access to a conversation with the participant. At the beginning of each interview, Lynn and Rachel presented the participant with a consent and confidentiality form re-stating the purpose of the research and asking for permission to record and transcribe the interview and offering anonymity.

2.3.2 PARTICIPANT ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

As mentioned above, each participant was given a consent form at the beginning of the interview that offered a choice for the participant's identity to remain confidential in the writing process. By presenting the consent form prior to the interview we followed AAA's Code of Ethics that state "researchers must determine in advance whether their hosts/providers of information wish to remain anonymous or receive recognition and make every effort to comply with those wishes."⁹⁰ After presenting the consent form the researchers also discussed with the participant the possibly implications of revealing their identity. The participants who can be seen as public figures chose not to remain anonymous and after much discussion between co-researchers, we feel we can ethically identify these people in our report by their names, which is why we indentified these participants by name and title in the previous section. In our analysis section, we identify these participants by title only in order to reduce any confusion about their official position. We withheld the names of the sexual educators we spoke with as they are not public figures and their identities should remain anonymous. In order to do this, we have chosen to identify them by the pseudonyms Jenni, Kalle, Karin and Elsa, which are not related to their real names.

⁹⁰ *ibid*

CHAPTER 3: THEORY OF SEXUALITY

*“Sexuality is natural but becomes cultural...”*⁹¹

Sexuality is a concept that can be explained and viewed from various perspectives. In the following sections we will introduce, discuss and examine different views of sexuality, sex and gender in anthropology, from the more structuralist view that sexuality—as represented in the quote above—is an innate part of existence to the development of anti-essentialist and feminist anthropology where sexuality is understood to be a social construction. This discussion forms the theoretical positioning for our research and analysis of the construction of sexuality in Sweden through the introduction of the word *slidkrans*.

3.1 FEMALE:NATURE AS MALE:CULTURE

Sex and sexuality are two innately linked words that embody a wealth of meanings. One can look at these meanings through postmodernist lenses, meaning we understand discourse produces both sex and sexuality. These discourses organize the cultural and contextual meanings as well as dictate the significance of sexual desires, identities and practices in Western societies.⁹² During the late 20th century, anthropologists expanded their ways of discussing sex/uality. Through this expansion, anthropologists have added a greater understanding to these amorphous concepts through investigations into the language⁹³ and power⁹⁴ of sex/uality, examples of which will be discussed further in the following section.

The term ‘sex’ was first used in the 16th century to illustrate the division between male and female, leading to what is understood by Western societies to be a biological division.⁹⁵ The dichotomous division between the sexes was used in anthropology to discuss the nature:culture contrast by structuralists such as Lévi-

⁹¹ Levi-Strauss 1969, 30 in MacCormack 1980, 2

⁹² Cameron and Kulick 2003, 19

⁹³ See Cameron and Kulick 2003

⁹⁴ See Rubin 1984

⁹⁵ Weeks 2003, 4

Strauss. Structuralist anthropologists viewed this distinction as a means of explaining the metaphors:

nature:culture
female:male

These metaphors rely on the assumptions that nature and culture are given constants within any society and that they remain static.⁹⁶ However, if it is understood that culture constructs the concepts of nature, culture and sex, then none of the above can be taken as a given or static.⁹⁷ Furthermore, one must be careful not to assume the researched group is comparable in organization or construction of gender, sex or sexuality to one's own community.⁹⁸ With that postmodernist view in mind, we will begin by reviewing the historical origins of the comparison.

The association between female and nature has historic roots in the Enlightenment, an era when the words 'nature' and 'culture' were used and understood in a new way—a way that was representative of the changes in how society viewed itself in relation to nature.⁹⁹ At this time, female and nature were thought to be closely related.¹⁰⁰ This relationship was based in part on a woman's bodily role in sex and motherhood, which was viewed as a woman's ultimate purpose.¹⁰¹ During the Enlightenment, the body's role in the act of sex caused sexuality to be seen as part of nature, based on its physiological actions and its fluidity.¹⁰² Through this association, the comparison between male:culture and female:nature emphasized the negative aspects of the female gender, ignorance and superstition.¹⁰³ Negative attributes associated with female were further supported by scientific and medical research during the 18th century, which challenged the

⁹⁶ MacCormack 1980, 5-11

⁹⁷ *ibid*, 6

⁹⁸ Moore 1988, 2

⁹⁹ Jordanova 1980, 44

¹⁰⁰ Bloch & Bloch 1980, 32

¹⁰¹ *ibid*

¹⁰² Jordanova 1980, 46

¹⁰³ *ibid*, 50-51

knowledge and morality of the midwife (in comparison to the modern surgeon).¹⁰⁴ This power struggle between midwife and surgeon represents the “growth of culture through the domination of nature...the increasing assertion of masculine ways over irrational, backward-looking women.”¹⁰⁵

The historical context presented above is an important element in understanding the development of different approaches to gender, sex and sexuality in anthropology and in the West. Until the late 20th century, anthropologists saw their work as an examination of other cultures looking for similarities in the organization of rituals, kinship, economics and gender as experienced through culture.¹⁰⁶ Here the assumption is that culture is *the* lens through which all information is filtered and understood. The metaphoric comparison of female:nature and male:culture came into focus in the 1970s and was discussed by Sherry Ortner in her essay, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”¹⁰⁷ The essay begins with the supposition that “the secondary status of women in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact.”¹⁰⁸ Ortner’s arguments draw upon the logic that was discussed above regarding the Enlightenment. The explanation for why women are understood to be closer to nature than men is based on women’s innate ability to create life from within themselves while men are forced to be outwardly creative “through cultural means,”¹⁰⁹ thus furthering culture. In terms of social roles, women are explained to be limited by their natural reproductive abilities, hence their proclivity for domestic work. Meanwhile, men venture out and participate in the public domain and society. Ortner’s essay relies heavily on the idea that there is a universal culture and nature distinction that represents a gendered hierarchy in which women are subordinate to

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, 53-54

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, 61

¹⁰⁶ Moore 1988, 9

¹⁰⁷ Ortner 1996, 21-42; (Note: Ortner later wrote an update to this article “So *Is* Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” see Ortner 1996, 173-180)

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, 21

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, 31

men.¹¹⁰ To Ortner, this universal rule causes gender separation and gendered behavior.¹¹¹ The universality of gender has been argued against by various feminist social scientists in favor of a more reflexive and less Western-centric construction.¹¹² Jane Goodale contests Ortner's arguments in her analysis of the Koulong concepts of gender division and presents an analytical model where single:married is a more relevant way to express the Koulong worldview than female:male.¹¹³ Through this model, Goodale illustrates the flaws in the universality of the female:nature and male:culture models.

3.2 ANTI-ESSENTIALISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Debates within anthropology about essentialist analysis of other cultures were important discussions in the late 20th century. Traditionally, anthropology observed and analyzed culture as a static fact. Anti-essentialists shifted this tradition to view anthropology as a way of explaining variations of how different communities construct, view and experience the world.¹¹⁴ This interpretivist take on anthropology highlights the way concepts like sex, gender and culture are socially constructed.¹¹⁵ Western feminist anthropologists and feminist perspectives heavily influenced these approaches.¹¹⁶ In challenging the traditional anthropological understanding of culture, anti-essentialists propose to modify the notion that culture is “a bounded universe of shared ideas and customs”¹¹⁷—something that is reified, self-contained and reproducing. The anti-essentialists instead propose culture should be viewed as fluid and adaptable.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz's work played an important role in the development of anti-essentialist and symbolic anthropology. Geertz's symbolic

¹¹⁰ McCormack 1980, 16-17

¹¹¹ Goodale 1988, 120-121

¹¹² See Goodale 1988 and Oyeronke Oyewumi 1998

¹¹³ Goodale 1988, 140-141

¹¹⁴ Vayda 1994, 321

¹¹⁵ Borfosky 1994, 469

¹¹⁶ Moore 1988, 1-2

¹¹⁷ Keesing 1994, 301

anthropology understands culture to be “an organized collection of symbolic systems.”¹¹⁸ His works such as the famous “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” explore the “actor-centered perspective” in symbolic analysis.¹¹⁹ Geertz’s method of thick description provides the ethnographer with tools to reflect upon their own position in the research and sort through the “layers of significance to derive the meaning” from the perspective of those being researched.¹²⁰ Geertz’s influence helped to shift the theoretical approach from what anti-essentialist anthropologists viewed as “the totalizing use of the idea of ‘a culture’ and the equating of one culture (passed on from generation to generation) with one society, can be an obstacle to seeing the importance of temporal factors, individual and categorical diversity, and local and large-scale juxtapositions.”¹²¹ These important developments within the anthropological tradition have allowed for the inclusion of more feminist practices within anthropological work as well as a consideration for an increasingly global community.

3.3 FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY AND SEX

Today sex cannot be understood to simply denote a difference of anatomy, biology or behavior, as explored by Judith Butler, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Don Kulick and others who challenge the biologically upheld sex binary.¹²² Sex has evolved from a simplistic biological definition to an embodiment of the culture and the developments made by queer theorists in identity politics, which has helped to continually question the essentialist assumptions that conflate gender and sexuality.¹²³ Authors like Fausto-Sterling have created a space where the voices that do not fit into the linguistically upheld dichotomy of sex can be heard. The meaning of sex has morphed into a powerful representation used to understand what the act, behavior and

¹¹⁸ McGee & Warms 2004, 524

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, 525

¹²⁰ *ibid*

¹²¹ Moore 1994, 373

¹²² See Butler 1990; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Kulick 1998

¹²³ Cameron and Kulick 2003, 28

identity of sex/uality is and *should* be.¹²⁴ Used as a noun, a verb or an adjective, the various uses of the term ‘sex’ demonstrate how complex and influential its concept is in the West.

3.3.1 CONSTRUCTING SEX/UALITY

In *Thinking Sex*, anthropologist Gayle Rubin proclaims, “[s]ex is a vector of oppression. The system of sexual oppression cuts across other modes of social inequality, sorting out individuals and groups according to its own intrinsic dynamics. It is not reducible to, or understandable in terms of, class, race, ethnicity, or gender. Wealth, white skin, male gender, and ethnic privileges can mitigate the effects of sexual stratification.”¹²⁵ Thus, as Rubin argues, sex cannot simply be seen as a biological feature but rather must be understood to be a social system that regulates each individual in unique ways in which context is a cogent feature. In short, she removes sex and sexuality from the confines of science and places them in the context of politics and culture. Her arguments follow with the anti-essentialist understanding that sex is constructed through the social and is not simply “biologically ordained.”¹²⁶ Furthermore, Rubin states “[s]exual ideology plays a crucial role in sexual experience. Consequently, definitions and evaluations of sexual conduct are objects of bitter contest.”¹²⁷ These disagreements also involve concepts of sexuality, not only the act of sex. By including sexuality in the discussion, Rubin underlines the influence of certain groups on the production of (acceptable) sexuality and the consequences of not complying to the norm.¹²⁸ While explaining the ways that sex acts as a “vector of oppression,” Rubin maintains sex/uality is a social construction that is primarily controlled through the production of a discourse of an acceptable sex/uality. Rubin’s understanding of sexuality directly challenges the structuralists’ nature:culture dichotomy. By viewing sexuality as a cultural construction it becomes

¹²⁴ *ibid*, 12

¹²⁵ Rubin 1984, 293

¹²⁶ *ibid*, 276

¹²⁷ Rubin, 294

¹²⁸ *ibid*

clear that the female:nature as male:culture interpretation is simply a way of representing the “vectors of oppression.” Following Rubin’s argument, if everyone is understood to have sexuality, then sexual ideologies and reflection as to who is controlling the construction of these views are fundamental in an analysis of anyone from a single person to a society.

Rubin’s ideas echo Foucault’s central argument in *The History of Sexuality*, where he asserts sexuality is a historically constructed network that connects erotic stimulation and pleasure with knowledge, discourses and power.¹²⁹ Foucault explains all of this through a genealogical study that explores the production of sexuality through its history of repression.¹³⁰ By outlining the historical context, Foucault clearly makes his argument that what matters:

is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex...but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and view points from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it...What is at issue...is the overall ‘discursive fact,’ the way sex is ‘put into discourse.’¹³¹

This view of sexuality as a social construction, he argues, has found its way into all aspects of life and is “controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way” based on its ties to the body, which are inherently connected to knowledge and power.¹³² Thus, in a more explicit sense, sexuality can be understood to be an influential social, political and moral issue within the West that is defined at the point of intersection between society and ourselves.¹³³ Accepting that sexuality is based on a contextually-bound cultural construction does not make it a defining feature of everyone’s identity. However, everyone possesses sexuality and is therefore at the mercy of the shifting discourses of sexuality.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Foucault 1990, 105-106

¹³⁰ *ibid*, 11

¹³¹ *ibid*

¹³² *ibid*, 107

¹³³ Weeks, 32; Cameron and Kulick 2003, 144

¹³⁴ Cameron and Kulick 2003, 8

To review, from an anti-essentialist perspective sex and sexuality are not static realities. Rather, they change constantly and as established above, are dependant on context for understanding. The perpetually shifting regulations on acceptable sex/uality in the West bring into focus the issue of power, which highlights whose voice can be heard within the discourse, who is deciding what it says and from which point(s) of view.¹³⁵ These notions of sex/uality help to establish what we believe to know about sex, meaning one's knowledge is not exclusively based on firsthand experiences, but influenced by discourse and society.¹³⁶ The words 'sex' and 'sexuality' are colored by context that defines what acceptable sex is, how to interpret sexual experiences and how one can understand their sexuality.¹³⁷ The language used to explain these terms sets standards through these discourses, dictating what is 'normal,' possible and desirable.¹³⁸ Thus, sex/uality are concepts that are produced and continually amended according to context. Understanding sex/uality to be a constructed concept allows us to critically examine the introduction of the word *slidkrans* as an example of creating a new sexuality.

3.4 PRESTIGE AND PURITY

Now that we have established sexuality as a culturally contextual construction, we must go deeper into the discussion to explore virginity to analyze how RFSU is constructing sexuality through the introduction of *slidkrans*. In considering questions related to virginity and its effect on the construction of sexuality, we will use Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead's contemplations on prestige and sexuality from the introduction to the book *Sexual Meanings* and Mary Douglas' work with purity.¹³⁹ The analytical theories presented for prestige and purity will be summarized below and then applied to our own material in the analytical chapter.

¹³⁵ *ibid*, 43

¹³⁶ *ibid*, 15-16

¹³⁷ *ibid*, 18

¹³⁸ *ibid*, 12

¹³⁹ 1981, 166-191

3.4.1 PRESTIGE

Sexual Meanings is a collection of essays addressing the issues of gender, sexuality and reproduction within ethnographic writing. The analytical premise is that prestige is the greatest recognizable discourse on influencing the construction of sexuality.¹⁴⁰ They define prestige as a social honor or value resulting from positions that are established through social evaluations.¹⁴¹ These hierarchal positions form prestige discourses that are historically and contextually specific and emerge to guide social structure and organization.¹⁴² Within this argument, Ortner and Whitehead identify three areas where prestige and sexuality meet: in the gender system; in consistent ways with other prestige discourses; and prestige and cross-sex relationships. Of these three areas, two are relevant for our analysis. The first states that gender systems are prestige discourses in and of themselves. The second reveals that “male prestige-oriented action” expresses cross-sex social relations.¹⁴³

It should be noted that in the original text, Ortner and Whitehead use the phrases “prestige structures” and “prestige systems.” We have chosen to use the word discourse in place of structure and systems based on a desire to be less universalist in our analysis.¹⁴⁴ This decision is based on Ortner’s later reflection on the implications of the words systems and structures in her essay “Gender Hegemonies.”¹⁴⁵ Through the essay Ortner explains that that both terms represent a society as a “single ‘system’ or as ordered by a single ‘structure,’ which embraces (or pervades) virtually every aspect of that social and cultural universe.”¹⁴⁶ This totalization of culture into a universal system undermines the anti-essentialist perspective of our analysis. Additionally Ortner notes the historical aspect of the terms and how they do not

¹⁴⁰ Ortner & Whitehead 1981, 12 & 16

¹⁴¹ *ibid*, 13

¹⁴² *ibid*, 15

¹⁴³ *ibid*, 16

¹⁴⁴ Ortner 1996, 145-147

¹⁴⁵ *ibid*, 139-172

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*, 145

account for change or development over time.¹⁴⁷ This perspective is key to our own consideration of how RFSU is constructing sexuality based on a change in vocabulary. Ortner's final argument for moving away from the words "system" and "structure" is they imply "implicitly...or explicitly" that they are "beneficial to the people who live within them."¹⁴⁸ This "benefit" does not allow the researcher to consider the political context that could bias these systems. Based on Ortner's discussion we have chosen to use the word discourse in place of "system" and "structure". The word discourse was selected based on the linguistic focus of this project and is used to allow for reflection upon the linguistic representations and an analysis of the practices and institutions related to prestige within the context of the introduction of *slidkrans*.

First let us consider the initial statement that gender systems are inherently prestige discourses. As a fundamental point, this concept echoes feminist literature but it is especially noteworthy based on the statement that "...the concepts used to differentiate men from women in terms of social worth are often identical to the concepts used to distinguish other differentially valued social types, and identical as well to the concepts used to grade individuals of the same gender."¹⁴⁹ By establishing order of prestige through comparisons between individuals of the same gender or different genders, the prestige discourse reifies behavior and social orders. An example of this can be found in Marilyn Strathern's essay "Some Implications of Hagen Gender Imagery," which looks at gender and personhood in the Papua New Guinea Highlands.¹⁵⁰ Strathern argues gender is used to designate autonomy in terms of social goals, meaning that women and men can be judged based on separate criteria.¹⁵¹ These different rubrics are also, for instance, used by women to evaluate

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*

¹⁴⁹ Ortner & Whitehead 1981, 16-17

¹⁵⁰ Strathern 1981, 166

¹⁵¹ *ibid*, 179

other women, which can result in derogatory names used for females.¹⁵² This is just one example of how the prestige discourse is used to separate sexes. By using separate systems to judge the behavior and actions of individuals of the same or different genders, the prestige discourse solidifies.

The second area discusses how maleness is created through the prestige discourses that then subsequently affect cross-sex social relations.¹⁵³ This is based on the idea that females are defined in terms of their relations to others through constructs such as marriage and division of labor, to name a few.¹⁵⁴ These relationships are formed in relation to the gendered prestige discourses to support a male-oriented hierarchy. Thus, the sexual and gender relationships of a culture will be influenced by the cross-sex relations and prestige structures. These ideas are further discussed by Jane Collier and Michelle Rosaldo in their essay “Politics and Gender in Simple Societies.”¹⁵⁵ In this essay, Collier and Rosaldo use three brideservice societies to explore gender and sexuality conceptions. Through their cross-cultural analysis, they surmise, “Politics are sexual politics because, whatever else they may concern, relations among men are organized through men’s claims to women. And if men say they hunt and kill in order to gain sexual access to women, then women turn the idiom around and use their sexuality to make claims to men.”¹⁵⁶ This example illustrates how individual relationships are formed by the inequalities that are part of the social and political organization of a society. Following that logic, it is clear sexuality is configured to be a positive or negative within this same system of relations that is shaped by both the political and the social.¹⁵⁷

In summary, prestige is a multi-faceted concept that can be applied to various topics. The view of gender binary as a prestige discourse fits well with the earlier argument that sexuality is a social construction. Additionally, the second point of

¹⁵² *ibid*, 188-89

¹⁵³ Ortner & Whitehead 1981, 18-19

¹⁵⁴ *ibid*, 19

¹⁵⁵ 1981, 275-329

^e *ibid*, 314

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*, 318

argument that cross-sex relations affect prestige discourses further elaborates the notion that the construction of sexuality is a fluid and contextual concept. Through our new lenses that recognize prestige discourses, let us now look to the idea of purity in terms of virginity.

3.4.2 *VIRGINITY AND PURITY*

Virginity and purity are linked through cultural and religious traditions.¹⁵⁸ There have been numerous ethnographic reports that touch upon virginity in relation to various forms of social organization from marriage to kinship to caste systems.¹⁵⁹ These organizations, which involve the relationship between virginity, sexuality and purity/pollution are numerous and in the broad sense can be “interpreted as symbols of the relations between parts of society.”¹⁶⁰ Following this logic, the affiliation of purity and pollution with virginity and sexuality is also a contextually based and ever-changing relationship that is socially constructed. Below we will discuss different ways virginity has been defined and then explore the intersection of virginity and purity in anthropology.

3.4.2.1 *DEFINING VIRGINITY*

Strictly speaking, there is no cross-cultural, universal definition of virginity. Virginity can refer to someone who has not masturbated, someone who has not experienced oral or anal sex, a girl whose vagina has not been penetrated or a myriad of other possibilities. Historian Hanne Blank discusses the negotiations surrounding virginity and states, “Virginity is invariably defined in terms of what it is not, and is believed to be proven most incontrovertibly by whatever signs (blood, pain, etc.) become obvious only in the moment of its obliteration.”¹⁶¹

In many Western societies today, it is generally accepted that a person who has experienced vaginal-penile heterosexual penetrative sex is no longer a virgin. One

¹⁵⁸ Douglas 2008, 194

¹⁵⁹ *ibid*, 173-195

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*, 4

¹⁶¹ Blank 2007, 96

explanation offered for this is that only heterosexuals can reproduce through penetrative sex,¹⁶² although this is changing with the advent of new technologies. It can be said that heteronormative, patriarchal societies could produce a definition of virginity that places the onus on women by making women bear markers of “virginity” while gays, lesbians, transgender and intersex people are excluded.

In defining virginity based on penetrative sex, undue emphasis is placed on the hymen, which has no biological ties to what is construed as “virginity.” There are, however, symbolic ties, meaning that many associate the “loss” of the hymen with the “loss” of a woman’s virginity. Blood and pain are also linked with the “loss” of the hymen. Still, blood and pain are not the only markers of “virginity;” from a cross-cultural perspective there are and have been countless markers of virginity for women, including the constitution of her urine or the feel of her breasts.¹⁶³ The Zulus, who perform “virginity testing” as a so-called strategy for HIV prevention, believe that a woman’s “virginity” status can be evaluated by her taut muscle tone.¹⁶⁴ The use of blood and pain as female virginity markers in many societies around the world may be due to initial (heterosexual, vaginally penetrating) sexual intercourse as being regarded as a ritual of transformation and sacrifice. Blank writes that blood and pain are connected symbolically with sacrifice.¹⁶⁵

Blood and pain are not only virginity markers in the Western world. Psychologists based in the Netherlands Bekker et al.¹⁶⁶ note the importance of “virginal” blood on the wedding night in some non-Western parts of the world that can drive a demand for hymen reconstructive surgery, although it should be noted that their statements contain many generalizations and make the assertion of one “Islamic culture”:

¹⁶² Blank 2007, 10

¹⁶³ Blank 2007, 82

¹⁶⁴ Scorgie 2002, 59

¹⁶⁵ Blank 2007, 112

¹⁶⁶ 1996, 330

In Islamic culture, staying a virgin until the wedding night is very important. Many young women are raised with the imperative to save their hymen for their husband. This norm implies no sexual intercourse, the avoidance of certain sports and a cautious approach to physical exertion. Before the wedding and around the wedding night, rituals take place that have to prove the bride's virginity. Some women are taken to medical doctors to get a certificate of their virginity. In other cases, a cloth with the woman's blood has to be demonstrated to the relatives, friends and neighbours after the defloration. If there is no evidence that the bride is a virgin, dissolution of the marriage can be one of the legal consequences.

While clearly the authors do not note any nuances and seem to reject the idea that virginity is valued in the West and in other parts of the non-Islamic world, there is some basis in that many women feel a need to demonstrate their so-called virginity with arbitrary tests. Such a pressure has lead many places to adopt virginity testing and hymen surgeries, which have medical basis, as our literature review will demonstrate.

In summary, the practice of defining virginity has consequences for everyone. As Blank writes: "defining virginity means directly affecting the lives of nearly all women, and many men as well. Despite what some people appear to think, defining virginity is not merely a philosophical exercise. It is an exercise in controlling how people behave, feel, and think, and in some cases, whether they live or die."¹⁶⁷

3.4.2.2 ANTHROPOLOGY OF VIRGINITY AND PURITY

Margaret Mead's work in Samoa helped to push discussions about gender, sexuality and virginity to the forefront in anthropology.¹⁶⁸ In her work, virginity was discussed through the Samoan "sacred maid"—a position of honor filled by a young female relative of the chief.¹⁶⁹ A primary requirement is that the "sacred maid" stays a virgin, which is regulated by the community.¹⁷⁰ According to Ortner, the emphasis on virginity here represents how women are valued in this society and accordingly

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*, 9

¹⁶⁸ Ortner & Whitehead 1981, 1-25

¹⁶⁹ Ortner, 371-72

¹⁷⁰ *ibid*, 372

relates to a woman's social status.¹⁷¹ Her argument is based upon the understanding that the "cultivation of virginity...is in fact associated in *all* hierarchal systems with high cultural value."¹⁷² From this perspective Ortner explains that this "value" is what gives women status within a society. Thus, women can be members of two groups the primary status group of virgin and subsequently a kinsperson and the secondary group of womanhood once a female has been penetrated and given birth.¹⁷³ Implicit in Ortner's discussion are the purity/pollution issues at play when protecting a "woman's value" through chastity. For a deeper discussion of these issues, we turn to Mary Douglas' work, *Purity and Danger*.¹⁷⁴ In this work, Douglas explores the notion of purity and pollution in the area of sexuality and virginity. Through the spread of Christianity, Douglas claims, the notion of virginity as a positive value was disseminated and was duly combined with various other beliefs that view the body as an "imperfect container which will only be perfect if it can be made impermeable."¹⁷⁵

Ortner, in a later work, further develops these ideas. In "The Virgin and the State" she attributes the potential danger and pollution caused by women, and their virginity in part to the evolution of state structures.¹⁷⁶ The development of the modern state caused purity to be seen as an innate feature that could be regulated and sustained by the state and through religious doctrine.¹⁷⁷ Combined with cultural beliefs, these fears relating to sexual purity created an explosive combination that regulated societal behavior. One example of this regulation is that it was used to effect gender roles in marriage and in other levels of social hierarchy.¹⁷⁸ This strict a pattern of purity can lead to contradiction and/or hypocrisy within a society.¹⁷⁹ Virginity as a mark of purity is often, Ortner notes, used in marriages between two

¹⁷¹ *ibid*, 401

¹⁷² *ibid*, emphasis in original text

¹⁷³ *ibid*

¹⁷⁴ Douglas 2008

¹⁷⁵ *ibid*, 195

¹⁷⁶ Ortner 1996, 52-53

¹⁷⁷ *ibid*, 53

¹⁷⁸ Douglas 2008, 194-95

¹⁷⁹ *ibid*, 202

different social groups, referred to as hypergamy.¹⁸⁰ By using virginity as a means to define social mobility, or simply location, females become ambiguously located in the social structure and are defined only by their purity or polluting effects.¹⁸¹

Within the purity/pollution dichotomy of virginity, it is possible to see the effects of prestige discourses on gender and cross-sex relations. At a cursory glance, virginity and the purity it is associated with are imbued with the idea of prestige: “A virgin is an elite female among females, withheld, untouched, exclusive.”¹⁸² Yet, the very notions of virginity and purity are contextually constructed and relative. This discussion of virginity and the purity/pollution idioms that influence it will inform our analysis of the construction of sexuality through the introduction of *slidkrans* in Sweden.

CHAPTER 4: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter outlines the relevant historical and medical knowledge around our area of study. The first section will outline the medical knowledge of the hymen in order to portray which misunderstandings exist about the physiology of the hymen. The second section outlines how the portrayal of immigrants in Sweden has affected the recent public debate about hymen surgeries. The third section outlines the linguistic context of the change to *slidkrans* and its adaptation by the general society.

4.1 THE HYMEN AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT: A REVIEW OF THE MEDICAL LITERATURE

Little is understood about the physiology of the hymen, but research from the past few decades has shown that many commonly held beliefs about the hymen are, in fact, false. There is some debate as to whether hymens are found in other species, with some maintaining that humans are the only species with hymens.¹⁸³ Blank asserts many other animals have hymens like llamas, seals, rats, chimpanzees and

¹⁸⁰ Ortner 1996, 55-57

¹⁸¹ *ibid*

¹⁸² *ibid*, 56

¹⁸³ See Hobday et al. 1997, 171

moles—yet these animals’ hymens serve a purpose: In the case of mammals with primarily underwater habitats, the hymen can protect the vagina from water while for other mammals the hymen can actually close up during non-fertile periods.¹⁸⁴

Hypotheses that attempt to address the hymen’s existence are generally built on false assumptions. One thesis asserts hymens were due to sexual selection on the part of the men because virgin females were so highly valued.¹⁸⁵ Another hypothesis holds that because of humankind’s aquatic past, the hymen could protect the vaginal opening from dangers.¹⁸⁶ A third hypothesis was that the hymen could help retain sperm and thus led to greater fertilization.¹⁸⁷ Hobday et al. hypothesize the hymen is a retained embryological structure that serves as a protective adaptation against infection and suggests the hymen may be “more developed” in societies that place a large emphasis on virginity and supposedly less developed “in societies with little or no interest in the structure.”¹⁸⁸ The most reasonable explanation of the human hymen is that it is a “tiny leftover of the process of genital development.”¹⁸⁹

Since ancient times, the hymen has been connected with virginity and bleeding. When the hymen is mentioned in ancient writing, it is to refute its existence, as in the case of the Greek Soranus, who wrote in 200 AD:

In virgins the vagina is depressed and narrower, because it contains ridges that are held down by vessels originating in the uterus; when defloration occurs, these ridges unfold, causing pain; they burst, resulting in the excretion of blood that ordinarily flows. In fact, the belief that a thin membrane grows in the middle of the vagina and that it is this membrane that tears in defloration or when menstruation comes on too quickly, and that this same membrane, by persisting and becoming thicker, causes the malady known as “imperforation,” is an error.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁴ Blank 2007, 23

¹⁸⁵ Hobday et al. 1997, 172

¹⁸⁶ *ibid*, 172

¹⁸⁷ Hobday et al. 1997, 172

¹⁸⁸ *ibid*, 172

¹⁸⁹ Blank 2007, 33

¹⁹⁰ Referenced in Blank 2007, 46

The earliest recorded mention of the actual term ‘hymen’ was in the 16th century: the then-famous physician Michael Savonarola wrote: “the cervix is covered by a subtle membrane called the *hymen*, which is broken at the time of deflowering, so that the blood flows.”¹⁹¹ Before this mention, Albert the Great had written, “there exist, in the cervix and at the entrance of the womb of virgins, membranes made of a tissue of veins and extremely loose ligaments which are, once seen, the proven signs of virginity.”¹⁹²

Perceptions of the hymen have changed little from the 1800s well into the 21st century. An article in *The Lancet* from 1865 explains, “An *ordinary* hymen, ordinary in position, form, and structure, that would of necessity break down under any ordinary attempt at sexual intercourse *by a consenting woman with a healthy man*.... is substantial proof of virginity” [emphasis in the original].¹⁹³

One common notion is that the hymen can “rupture” early on in a girl’s life because of sports or tampon use. Recent studies have shown this common understanding has no basis in reality. The largest study looking at the hymens of women who had not been sexually abused involved 300 postmenarchal women. It was discovered that horseback riding, gymnastics, use of tampons and vigorous sports had no significant impact on the genital anatomy, including the hymen.¹⁹⁴ Still, the myth that these activities can impact or “rupture” a girl’s hymen has persisted in many societies around the world.

It is often assumed that girl’s or woman’s virginity can be ascertained through a physical examination of the hymen, with a “ruptured” hymen indicating a non-virgin. Medical studies contract this common misconception. Many medical studies on the hymen were performed in order to obtain indicators of sexual abuse during the 1970s and 1980s. Doctors wanted a sure-fire way to assess whether a girl or woman had faced sexual trauma and many felt the hymen was one area of the body where this

¹⁹¹ Referenced in Jacquart and Thomasset 1988, 44

¹⁹² *ibid*

¹⁹³ (Anonymous) 1865, 51

¹⁹⁴ Emans et al. 1995, 167

trauma could be seen on girls. Unfortunately, doctors encountered many problems. One issue is that there is no way to create a standardized hymenal opening measurement because it has also been noted that development, age, the position of the child being measured as well as the degree of relaxation can have a large impact on the measurement.¹⁹⁵ There is no “standard” shape or form of the hymen; the hymen has been described as septate, cesentric, denticulate, annular, eccentric, subseptus, microperforated, sculptatus, vertical and infudibuliform.¹⁹⁶ The hymen’s color, resiliency and thickness vary by individual.¹⁹⁷

One large difference was found between the hymens of prepubescent and postpubescent girls: Curtis and San Lazaro note that while vaginal penetration can cause tearing of the hymenal tissue in prepubescent girls, in adolescent girls “so called rupture and bleeding of the hymen is not to be routinely expected after first sexual intercourse.”¹⁹⁸ It is postulated that the membrane becomes much more flexible as girls develop due to the influence of hormones. Estrogen cream was used successfully to keep the hymenal opening from closing shut for dozens of women with imperforated hymens.¹⁹⁹ In a review of hymen studies, Nazer and Palusci charted the differences of the individual hymens and the development of the hymen in girls:

It is important to keep in mind the normal anatomic variations of female genitalia are affected by the developmental stage and age and even vary among girls of the same developmental stage and age. In infants, the hymen is circumferential and redundant, the preschool girl has a hymen that is thin with rudimentary labia minora, and the child in early puberty has a thickened hymen with developing labia minora. To summarize, the female genitalia in normal children may appear differently.²⁰⁰

Christianson and Eriksson, two midwives in Sweden, write that children and young people are falsely taught that the hymen causes the vaginal opening to be tight

¹⁹⁵ Heger and Emans 1990, 222

¹⁹⁶ Raveenthiran 2009, 225

¹⁹⁷ Blank 2007, 39

¹⁹⁸ Curtis and San Lazarao 1990, 605

¹⁹⁹ Acar et al. 2007, 1377

²⁰⁰ 2008, 10

and that the hymen ruptures upon a girl's first penetration, leading to vaginal bleeding.²⁰¹ They assert that in their careers they have never seen an "intact" hymen.²⁰² Their statement is backed up by the medical literature.

From the late 1970s, a number of studies have demonstrated that it is impossible to ascertain whether a woman has experienced penetration of the vagina (including penile-vaginal penetrative sex).²⁰³ In short, there is no such thing as a "ruptured" or "intact" hymen. These studies have not been questioned in the medical literature.

Despite new information about the hymen, it was still controversial in Sweden in 2001 to claim that there was not membrane covering the vagina.²⁰⁴ A sensational incest trial indicates that erroneous medical information about the hymen was being used to incarcerate people as well as exonerate them in Sweden. In 1999, the verdict of a man accused of repeatedly raping his 13-year-old daughter was overturned after a medical examination revealed the girl had an intact hymen despite an earlier medical examination, which helped strengthen accusations, showing that her hymen was "gone."²⁰⁵ It is not known whether this kind of evidence is still being used in Swedish courtrooms today.

It has also been noted that descriptions of the hymen in Swedish biology books today have much in common with descriptions 50 years ago—with claims that it will rupture during first intercourse and lead to bleeding and pain and the idea that sports and other activities can cause the hymen to rupture.²⁰⁶ Even Nyamko Sabuni, Sweden's current Minister for Integration and Gender Equality is misinformed about the hymen. In 2006 she wrote, "the hymen can rupture from other reasons than

²⁰¹ 1994, 317

²⁰² Christianson and Eriksson 1994, 317

²⁰³ See Underhill and Dewhurst 1978, Berenson 1998, Goodyear-Smith and Laidlaw 1998, Heger et al. 2002, Kellogg et al. 2004, Nazer and Palusci 2008, Anderst et al. 2009

²⁰⁴ Janke 2007

²⁰⁵ See Hedlund 1999, S1:106 and Tures 1998

²⁰⁶ Janke 2007

intercourse: by bicycling, horse riding or the use of tampons.”²⁰⁷ It was in this climate of ignorance that the word *slidkrans* was introduced.

4.2 VIRGINITY IN THE SWEDISH CONTEXT: THE DOMAIN OF THE OTHER

In Swedish, the normal expression for the loss of virginity is *förlöra*, or lose, which has many of the same associations as in the English expression, “losing one’s virginity.” In many parts of Swedish society, non-menstrual blood is commonly seen as a marker of virginity for females, meaning that a girl or woman is expected to bleed from her vagina upon first vaginal intercourse.²⁰⁸ Blood and pain during first vaginal penetration are, from a medical standpoint, uncommon. Elmerstig et al. believed they would find young Swedish women experiencing pain during the first experience of “sexual intercourse” due to the inelasticity of the hymen at younger ages in their study of 300 women who visited the Youth Clinic. Their actual findings did not find any correlation between pain and age of first “sexual intercourse.”²⁰⁹

From a medical standpoint, it cannot be said to be common for a woman to bleed upon first vaginal penetration. One study from 1978 claims more than 40% of women who participated in the study of 100 women did not experience any bleeding after their first penile-vaginal penetration.²¹⁰ In a non-academic poll performed by an obstetrician, it was found that most women did not bleed during first intercourse.²¹¹ According to Raveenthiran, bleeding during penetrative sex may be due to lacerations along the vaginal wall during penile penetration and not due to any hymenal injury.²¹²

Virginity has long been viewed by sexuality researchers in Sweden as the domain of “immigrants,” cast as the Other. Forsberg notes early Swedish research on adolescent sexuality did not address the issue of virginity. Helmius’ doctoral dissertation in 1990 stated that in Sweden, virginity was not attached any real

²⁰⁷ Sabuni 2006, 37

²⁰⁸ Janke 2007

²⁰⁹ Elmerstig et al. 2009, 100

²¹⁰ Whitley 41

²¹¹ Paterson-Brown 1998, 461

²¹² 2009, 224

importance but in other cultures it was given value.²¹³ In that sense, virginity was portrayed by researchers as something that belongs to the Other, and not something that concerns Swedes. More recently, sexuality research has become more nuanced and explored young people's concerns about virginity and its importance in Swedish society, for "immigrants" and "Swedes" alike.²¹⁴ Still, representations and understanding of immigrants in Swedish society have been simplified and stereotyped. In order to understand how the Other's sexuality has sparked a debate about sexuality in Sweden, we will outline the situation of immigrants in Sweden and the debate around "honor cultures" and hymen surgeries.

Around 14% of the Swedish population has a "foreign background," meaning people who were born outside of Sweden or born in Sweden to parents who both were born outside of Sweden.²¹⁵ The majority of people with a "foreign background" were born outside of Sweden.²¹⁶ As of 2004, the largest group of immigrants by far came from Finland, followed by (the former) Yugoslavia, Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iran, Poland, Norway, Denmark, Germany and Turkey.²¹⁷ While immigrants have an extensive variety of backgrounds, the media's presentation (or image) of immigrants is narrow-minded and generalized.

The concept of "immigrant" has changed over time in Sweden.²¹⁸ Within media discourses today, the category "immigrant" is not based on citizenship; in fact, according to De los Reyes, some people born in Sweden are seen as outsiders.²¹⁹ Despite the diversity of the immigrant community in Sweden, according to Molina and De los Reyes, immigrants have been constructed by the Swedish media to be a homogenous group.²²⁰ In regard to media's representations of Swedish residents,

²¹³ Forsberg 2006, 41

²¹⁴ See, for example, *Ungdomars frågor om sexualitet* (2007) for a discussion about status and virginity in Skåne

²¹⁵ Statistiska centralbyrån 2005, 6

²¹⁶ *ibid.*, 18-19

²¹⁷ *ibid.*, 22

²¹⁸ Brune 2004

²¹⁹ De los Reyes 2006, 30

²²⁰ Molina & De los Reyes 2001

there are two-overarching groups: “Swede” and “immigrant.” The category “immigrant” is equated with non-Swedishness.²²¹ The norm category, “Swedish,” is not marked in the Swedish media.²²² The attributes of these categories, including narratives about immigrants, will be examined in the next section.

Brune’s 1997 media study examined typographies and narratives about immigrants in the Swedish media, which are still relevant today, as this section demonstrates. Her findings show newspapers in Sweden were able to make generalizations about immigrants by creating a limited set of roles for immigrants and writing a large number of articles with the same kind of themes about immigrants; this led to a reduced picture of immigrants.²²³ These particular images of immigrants, repeated over time, form a distorted image of immigrants and cannot be said to accurately represent immigrants.²²⁴ In fact, these typographies, or “character galleries” of, for example, an “immigrant man” or “immigrant girl” are placed in opposition to societal norms.²²⁵ Culture is often attributed to the domain of the Other in the Swedish mass media. The idea of culture is often framed by the Swedish media as something essential and unchanging; participants and so-called experts strengthen this view.²²⁶ Instead of pointing out particular countries or groups of people, the media often speaks about “patriarchal cultures” with “virginity norms” and “collectivist cultures.”

Because the Other becomes culturalized, culture is often used as an explanation of violence toward women committed by non-Swedish men; if a Swedish man commits the same crime then the explanation is usually found in the individual.²²⁷ Brune notes Muslim men were reduced in the Swedish media to automatons ruled by their culture and religion in regard to violence against women; in

²²¹ Brune 2004, 311

²²² *ibid*

²²³ Brune 2004, 254

²²⁴ *ibid*, 255

²²⁵ *ibid*

²²⁶ Bredström 2006, 186

²²⁷ *ibid*, 195

this sense Islam was connected to “honor related” crimes in the media; she explains that “[w]hen control and oppression and violence against women are explained by Islam and traditional culture it’s more or less obvious that oppression and violence in similar forms aren’t present in Swedish, modern families.”²²⁸ Through the use of media character galleries, immigrants become associated with oppression, tradition and patriarchy while “Swedish people” are associated with freedom, modernity and gender equality. An immigrant is often chosen to represent the Other, which stands in opposition to a “Swedish” person chosen to symbolize “us.”²²⁹

Brune identifies a model narrative regarding immigrant women, that of “the heroine’s struggle for freedom and individuality is met with violence and repression.”²³⁰ The narrative starts with women being victims of their own (mono) culture and traditions, then starting to break free and by finding opportunities to grow in Swedish society, making it their goal to become Swedish and finally facing attack from foreign men for pursuing their dreams.²³¹ For non-Swedish girls and women, Sweden’s national character is presented as a kind of Utopia.²³² One can assume that within this narrative, non-Swedish men, often the heroine’s family, are the oppressors. Bredström notes culturalized descriptions of immigrants in the media rarely meet with open resistance.²³³ Despite the fact that immigrants from Iraq, Iran and Turkey are outnumbered by those from Finland,²³⁴ the view of the category “immigrant” has been reduced to an exotified, oppressed “immigrant female” and an oppressive, violent “immigrant man.”

These representations have come to be seen as truth by many in Sweden. Anthropologist Fanny Ambjörnsson, who studied constructions of femininity at a

²²⁸ Brune 2004, 274

²²⁹ Bredström 2006, 187

²³⁰ *ibid.*, 261

²³¹ *ibid.*, 289

²³² *ibid.*, 261

²³³ Bredström 2006, 189

²³⁴ Statistiska centralbyrån 2005, 22. Finnish immigrants’ history in Sweden cannot be ignored yet is not relevant to this paper; for a nuanced discussion of this see Brune 2004

Swedish high school, found her participants viewed "immigrant" girls as oppressed in opposition to "Swedish girls," who are seen as modern, free and independent.²³⁵ "Immigrant" boys were stereotyped as oppressors of women, as well as macho, sexual and desiring of Swedish girls.²³⁶ Swedish sociologist Nils Hammarén's study of masculinity in a Gothenburg suburb outlines a nuanced depiction of males who are viewed as immigrants. The "immigrant" boys he spoke with were conscious that they were considered a problem and this consciousness constituted a large part of the construction of their identity:

Some boys say that racialized representations become a burden and can obstruct their contacts with girls. Others talk about how they are not seen as "real immigrants" or "Muslims," but instead as "Swedish," and are therefore constructed as exceptions, which reinforces the general representation of "immigrants" as different and strange. Experiences of being the "other" leads to varying reactions, one is to join critics of "immigrants" and stage a gender discourse, another is to load "the immigrant" position with respectability and high status and criticize an excluding "Swedishness." Talking about "Swedishness" as "bad" constitutes a position from which "immigrant young men" can see themselves as "good" and respectable.²³⁷

Fadime Şahindal's death at the hands of her father in early 2002²³⁸ was a key event in the Swedish and international media debate concerning immigrants, culture, "honor" and "honor killings." Many argued that such violence was rooted in culture, while others argued that focusing so much attention on the issue normalized violence against women in Swedish society.

A discussion regarding intersections of immigrants and sexuality came to head in the summer of 2008 when the newspaper *SVD* revealed in their article "County Councils Perform 'Virginity Operations'" that state money was being used to fund hymen surgeries for "young women with roots in countries and cultures in which

²³⁵ Ambjörnsson 2007, 264

²³⁶ *ibid*, 255

²³⁷ Hammarén 2008, 338-339

²³⁸ Wikan 2003, 1

honor culture is widespread.”²³⁹ The information was cobbled from a preliminary draft of a survey of honor-related violence. The article detailed how public health care costs for hymen surgeries were 260 SEK compared to 10,000 to 25,000 SEK for private clinics.²⁴⁰

Three camps quickly emerged in the debate that was to follow on hymen surgeries: those in favor of hymen surgeries in order to save girls and women from potential harm, those opposed to the surgeries on the basis of them supporting honor culture and those opposed to the surgeries because they were ineffective. There was some overlap between the last two camps. The discourses around this issue often drew upon a new source previously not found in discourses on honor culture: science. In the form of medical knowledge about the hymen, it was possible to argue that because penetration of the vagina is not visible on the vagina, it is impossible to ascertain whether a girl is a virgin or not, thus the surgeries are completely unnecessary. Instead, education was needed to correct this misunderstanding.

Hymen “reconstructive” surgery appears to be just an arbitrary narrowing of the vagina.²⁴¹ If the hymen reconstructive surgery uses part of the vaginal walls then it is possible that the scars may lead to painful vaginal intercourse as well as problems with child delivery later in life.²⁴² These issues are not addressed in the previously mentioned three articles that detail how hymen reconstructive surgery is performed. The presence of blood is required for most, if not all hymen surgeries in order to be successful. Of the very few scientific articles detailing the procedure (which notes that many women do not bleed upon their first penetrative sexual intercourse), one recommends inserting gelatin capsules with blood-like substances; a follow-up with patients does not record the presence or absence of blood on the wedding night.²⁴³

²³⁹ Brink 2008

²⁴⁰ *ibid*

²⁴¹ Raveenthiran 2009, 225

²⁴² *ibid*, 225

²⁴³ Prakash 2009, 221

It is not known how many hymen “reconstructive” surgeries are performed in Sweden because public facilities do not register it as a separate procedure and private facilities are not required to register the surgery at all.²⁴⁴ There is also no documentation of follow-up to hymen surgeries in Sweden despite their existence for some time.²⁴⁵ Birgitta Essén, who works at the Women’s Clinic in Malmö, told Sweden’s Radio that instead of suggesting surgery for a woman who is afraid of not bleeding on her wedding night she tries to find other solutions, which can include discussing the issue with the soon-to-be husband, aligning her period to coincide with the wedding night by using birth control pills or ordering blood capsules on the internet.²⁴⁶ Sweden is one of the few countries that has a law against female genital mutilation although whether hymen surgery could be considered female genital mutilation is, of course, up to debate.²⁴⁷

4.3 CHANGE TO SLIDKRANS

The Swedish word for hymen, *mödomshinna*, comes from the 1700s and is composed of two parts, *mödom* and *hinna*. *Mödom*, which is not used in modern Swedish, literally means a female virgin. *Mödom* is associated with the word *mö*, which is an old-fashioned term for an unmarried woman.²⁴⁸ *Hinna* is a term for a thin covering, layer or membrane.²⁴⁹ This descriptive term for the hymen, not matched in English, is not backed by any scientific evidence, as the previous section has discussed.

It was still controversial in Sweden in 2001 to claim there was not a membrane covering the vagina.²⁵⁰ According to one recent survey, most high school students still believe most women will bleed when first being penetrated.²⁵¹ One gynecologist

²⁴⁴ Janke 2007

²⁴⁵ Essén 2006

²⁴⁶ Janke 2007

²⁴⁷ Christianson and Eriksson 1994, 322

²⁴⁸ Malmström et al. 2007, 383

²⁴⁹ *ibid*, 225

²⁵⁰ Janke 2007

²⁵¹ *ibid*

noted that by keeping the word *mödomshinna*, the idea that there is something that ruptures when a woman first has sex is kept as well.²⁵² It was in this environment that the change to *slidkrans* was made.

The word *slidkrans* and information spread by RFSU has appeared on government websites such as Vårdguiden.se, run by Stockholm's local government and ne.se (Sweden's National Encyclopedia). Even the website for Youth Clinics around Sweden, umo.se, states "the myth about the hymen has been around a long time but now it's time to dispel it."²⁵³

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

In this chapter we will analyze the information gathered through our interviews. To begin the analysis, we each read the interview transcripts separately and identified certain prominent themes in the conversations. We then discussed the themes that we each found dominant and agreed upon a framework to base our analysis. The themes we found to be most relevant to our examination of the construction of sexuality in Sweden through the introduction of *slidkrans* were: power of language, education, the Other and silence. No theme was discussed independently of the other themes by the participants. Rather, each one was presented as intersecting and coloring the participant's position and understanding of the four identified dominant themes that construct their broader experience of *slidkrans*. In the following four sections we will look at how each of our participants explained their experiences with *slidkrans* in terms of these four themes. The analysis will be informed by the theoretical tools prestige and purity that we have established throughout the thesis.

5.1 THE POWER OF A WORD

All of our interviews included a discussion of *slidkrans* as a new word in the Swedish language. The various positions of our participants in relation to the word and its introduction offered enlightening insight into the power of language. The

²⁵² *ibid*

²⁵³ UMO 2010

importance of language, terminology and the power that the new word *slidkrans* is imbued with emerged as primary themes in all of the interviews. Language as the primary tool through which we interpret and communicate actions and representations profoundly shapes the way one understands sexuality.²⁵⁴ Using this definition we look at how the participants understand the power of language in (de)constructing the discourses of virginity and sexuality in Sweden.

5.1.1 POWER THROUGH LANGUAGE

As explained in previous chapters, RFSU has a history in Sweden of introducing new words and adjusting the Swedish sexual and anatomical lexicon. With the introduction of *slidkrans*, Maria explained RFSU “wanted to...change attitudes and behaviors and we could see that there were a lot of questions both from women and young women as well as from young men on this (virginity) issue.”²⁵⁵ In our interviews, discussions about the introduction of the new word *slidkrans* brought up three major themes. These themes were authority, the word *slidkrans* as an addition to the Swedish vocabulary and acceptance. The authority theme was used to explain the introduction of the word, its scientific basis and accuracy. The word *slidkrans* was discussed in terms of the sound of the word and its origins and translations. Acceptance, and lack thereof was used to explain the change of vocabulary and its effect on ideas of virginity and sexuality in Sweden.

5.1.2 AUTHORITY

Working from the idea that language is how we can express and understand concepts, such as sexuality, it makes sense that the vocabulary available at a specific moment in time creates the boundaries for what is seen to be possible and normal.²⁵⁶ With the introduction of *slidkrans*, these boundaries have been called into question in Sweden. The comments related to the notion of authority can be divided into two

²⁵⁴ Cameron and Kulick 2003, 12

²⁵⁵ Andersson, Maria. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

²⁵⁶ Ibid

groups: the RFSU officials and the sexual educators. The RFSU staff discussed authority from their understanding of why the organization coined the word *slidkrans* and the sexual educators referenced authority in terms of their experience teaching about the word and their personal reflections on what the new word meant to them.

Primarily the RFSU staff conversations explained RFSU's involvement in introducing *slidkrans* by referring to the numerous questions the organization received about virginity from both citizens and health care professionals throughout the years. Maria succinctly explained, "we [RFSU] got a lot of questions...there is a lot of misconceptions and...we realized that instead of just discussing [hymen] reconstruction...it's better to view the concept or the misconception of the hymen and bring that up."²⁵⁷ Thus, based on the organization's history that has established it as a trustworthy source of information about sexual and reproductive health, RFSU was asked by the populace to address the myth of virginity. The organization's authority was built during decades of work in Sweden; its previous addition to the Swedish language, *snippa*, was referenced during the interviews and was used as the motivation behind *slidkrans* media campaign. The RFSU press officer explained during the interview that "Introducing that word [*snippa*] went extremely well and that is now used as the common word in Sweden and I thought we could try to do the same thing again."²⁵⁸ Even before the word had been officially introduced, RFSU relied upon its authority within Sweden to ensure the acceptance of *slidkrans* into the Swedish lexicon.

The sexual educators presented authority in a different way explaining it from the point of intersection of the new word's power and the authenticity of the research that makes up the *slidkrans* booklet with their own authority as RFSU sexual educators. Alán Ali invoked these two ideas of authority in the following quotes.

²⁵⁷ Andersson, Maria. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

²⁵⁸ Castelius, Olle. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

“...when I use it [the *slidkrans* booklet] I can feel confident that it’s not just someone just claiming that it is this way, that there’s research behind these facts and it makes my job easier...”²⁵⁹

“...sometimes girls say, “How do you know about that?” Then I bring up that I’m a sexual educator with RFSU.”²⁶⁰

These intersecting confidences—one in RFSU and their research; the other in himself as a representative of RFSU—were invoked to support his work with youth. By using his association with RFSU, Alán is reifying the organization’s authority in the field of sexual and reproductive health. Facts and scientific research are presented as liberating tools that free the discourse of virginity from its ties to the hymen, which motivates feelings of confidence and authority for the sexual educators when they meet with students. Armed with a booklet produced by a sexual and reproductive health authority, the sexual educators are imbued with the authority of RFSU and science.

During the interviews, many sexual educators also commented on the power of the word *slidkrans* and indicated their confidence in RFSU’s new word. When reflecting on her own experience learning about *slidkrans*, Elsa said, “I was [excited] because it’s so strange to have a word that says there is a membrane, but then actually it is not [a membrane] because the word itself makes it sound like there is just a [makes a circular motion indicating a top/membrane].”²⁶¹ Elsa’s excitement in the new word was echoed by Kalle: “I didn’t really know before [about *slidkrans*], I wasn’t knowledgeable, I had trouble understanding that there was a membrane that would rupture or some such but I knew it wasn’t just A or B before, so the RFSU

²⁵⁹ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

²⁶⁰ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

²⁶¹ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Elsa). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

training was a bit of an awakening for me as well.”²⁶² The sexual educators’ faith in the truth of RFSU’s booklet and the new word indicates how their own views shifted from the purity that was part of the myth of virginity and the hymen toward what they view as a more accurate and factually-based idea of virginity and anatomy. The self-reflection element within the interviews provided a different and interesting look at the reactions of sex educators to *slidkrans*.

The sexual educators’ reflections did not only focus on their own experiences, but also out on the societal reactions to the new word *slidkrans* and its power to change views of virginity. In our discussion, Jenni noted,

Of course since the word was introduced it’s been placed more on the agenda. I’ve been thinking that it’s been weird to talk about it as a myth, and say we’ve [RFSU] come up with a new name, in that sense it’s been contradictory, because when you bring it up, it does exist, even if it’s a little mucous ring/wreath, but still, the myth of the hymen does exist in reality, but that’s my personal opinion, not RFSU’s.²⁶³

Here Jenni questions the power of RFSU and the work *slidkrans* to challenge the myth of the hymen and virginity within Sweden. By reflecting upon what is real—the myth of the hymen or the research based anatomical word that RFSU is presenting—Jenni implicitly draws upon concepts of purity and prestige that are intrinsically linked to both cultural constructions of virginity. In Jenni’s understanding, the discussion of *slidkrans* as a correction to the myth is a reifying act that keeps the myth alive and part of the discourse.

Karin also expounded on the introduction of *slidkrans* and noted, “...the most important things is that it is up for discussion...just to talk about *slidkrans*. I think we have to get used to it because in five years there will be no hymen, there will only be

²⁶² Interview with a sex educator (alias: Kalle). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23.

²⁶³ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Jenni). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

slidkrans.”²⁶⁴ As the concluding statement to her interview, Karin clearly indicated not only her confidence in the word *slidkrans* but also the shift that is taking place in the discourse of virginity and sexuality in Sweden. She confidently expressed the opinion that within a mere five years’ time, the misnomer *mödomshinna* will be replaced by the more accurate *slidkrans*. Throughout our discussion and culminating in this statement, Karin described the liberatory power of this linguistic change when compared with the former idea of the ruptured hymen. Karin’s position was quite contrary to Jenni’s view of the introduction of *slidkrans*, but both share the understanding of purity and prestige that are features of the virginity discourse.

In all of our interviews, the participants commented on the authority of RFSU that prompted and facilitated the organization’s introduction of *slidkrans* and the power that *slidkrans* has to challenge and correct the myth of hymen and discourse of virginity. Each of the quotes demonstrates the authority within Sweden that RFSU has when it comes to sexual and reproductive health questions. The research and facts that constitute the *slidkrans* booklet are used as testaments of truth by the sexual educators to support their discussion about virginity and *slidkrans* with the students. We do not doubt the research behind the *slidkrans* booklet, but we would be remiss if we did not question the notion of scientific fact and absolute truth. In this case the truth, just like sexuality and virginity, is relative and contextually constructed. According to our participants, RFSU is correcting the idea that the hymen exists and can be taken as an (anatomical) symbol of virginity, ideas that were based on purity concepts and shaped by gendered notions of prestige. The authority of RFSU within Sweden, from the perspective of our participants, creates and supplies the power to the word *slidkrans* to change the discourse of virginity. Part of the authority discussion is the word *slidkrans*, which we will now consider.

²⁶⁴ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Karin). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 15th.

5.1.3 THE LANGUAGE OF SLIDKRANS

The introduction of the word *slidkrans* by RFSU is an attempt to address questions within Sweden regarding virginity. As Maria explained, “We didn’t think of it as a campaign when we started, but probably you are right. It has turned out to be a campaign.”²⁶⁵ This campaign has been met with a wide variety of reactions to the word and the concept. The word itself inspired a variety of responses from our participants. When asked what her initial reaction to the word *slidkrans* was, Karin replied, “I think it is a very ugly word. Very [...] To me it seems very clinical and it’s a bit...bit...awkward word. It’s a bit dull...*slidkrans*...I don’t know.” Karin’s aversion to the word was in stark contrast to Elsa’s excitement. When asked how she found out about the word and her reaction, Elsa explained,

I found out about the word when we started to, when we had the education [for becoming an RFSU sex educator]. But I knew before that, my mom she was working as a nurse in school, so when she talked to me about sex when I was young, she always told me there is nothing like a [gestures with her hand in a circle]...and she was talking very firmly about this kind of *krans*, so I knew before but I never heard this word [...] so I was really happy.²⁶⁶

Through this quote it seems Elsa implicitly challenges the prestige discourses that she is aware situate virginity and purity as anatomical features through the word *mödomshinna*.

Elsa was not alone in her relief to finally have a word that described what she had learned to be true. Kalle, Linda and Christina all mentioned their own, and other people’s excitement over the new word in our conversations. The word *slidkrans* helped to explain what many people already believed to be true, or to clear up questions they had, thus they were excited and validated in their beliefs. However, not everyone is excited or liberated by the new word. Some are quite confused by the new

²⁶⁵ Andersson, Maria. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

²⁶⁶ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Elsa). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

term. In our conversation, Alán brought up a positive interpretation to confusion that has surrounded the new word.

...it's been like a very big issue for Sweden I don't know if issue is the right word, in the radio, [...]because you know you have *slidkrans*, but if you want to have a cake like a *vetekrans*, like a... [Lynn explains that this is a typical woven-looking cake in Skåne] So it's called a *vetekrans*, so the guys are calling [into the radio program] and saying "Hey so what should I do, should I can go to the bakery and say hey, Bosse, how you doing today? I'll have a *vetekrans*, *kanelkrans*, and yeah a *slidkrans* as well. Haha this is stupid." And RFSU got a lot of stupid comments you know but any publicity in that case was good publicity and I got a lot of questions from papers and I actually did a funny thing about this. So they asked me, "So what do you think of it when people make fun of it?" and I say it's good. So when this guy goes to bakery and he tells Bosse, "I want to have a *slidkrans*" and Bosse says, "We don't have a *slidkrans*. What is a *slidkrans*?" and then you have to explain what it is, and people at the bakery will know what a *slidkrans* is and it's actually a gain for us, and it's actually the way it has been.²⁶⁷

As Alán explained, the callers' confusion and joke about the meaning of *slidkrans* based on its similarity to a typical baked good has helped to spread *slidkrans* and spark a discussion on the concept of virginity and what was formally known as the hymen. Here, Alán views each new person who hears about *slidkrans* as a success in challenging the previous construction of virginity. This success though, in part, must be judged based on the acceptance of the word into the Swedish common vocabulary, which we will move on to consider in the following sub-section.

5.1.4 ACCEPTANCE

Demystifying the myth of virginity and the hymen through the development and introduction of a new word, according to our participants, has been met with some surprise and disbelief. The former word *mödomshinna* has, based on literature and our interviews, contributed to the notion that anatomically there is a membrane which covers the entrance to the vagina. As Linda explained: "Some of them

²⁶⁷ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

[teachers] try to show for the students, in different ways about how the *mödomshinna* is not logical at all...They make it very concrete for them, but there is still this word.”²⁶⁸

Throughout our interviews, every sexual educator discussed different scenarios during which the students expressed disbelief at the word *slidkrans*. The following quotes are from three different sexual educators, Kalle, Elsa and Jenni who explain their experiences introducing *slidkrans* to different groups of students.

“They [the students] didn’t believe it, I think. Some of them, someone raised their hand and said, “You say one thing but I’ve been taught something different, why do you think you’re right?” which is a good question, and it was a hard question because we couldn’t explain patriarchal structures, oppression, and such but we’re not going to criticize their way of seeing things, that’s not what we’re doing, but we said that research shows that there’s no membrane, except in a few cases, but we didn’t mention that.”²⁶⁹

“When we say it’s impossible to check [if a person is a virgin] the response is ‘that’s not true’ and even if we try to explain and when we talk about it a *lot* and in the end I still think they go home and say ‘Maybe it is like this, maybe it isn’t’ so I mean, who would dare to take the chance?”²⁷⁰

“There’s actually many that don’t believe me...They [students] say they know from their own experience that they have to rupture it, that it’s something that’s dramatic. There are some girls that say, ‘but it can hurt and therefore there must be a hymen...’ and I explain that, ‘yes, I understand that it can cause pain but not because there’s a membrane that you have to rupture,’ and I explain how it depends on other things.”²⁷¹

The first quote, from the conversation with Kalle, references his experiences with a group of refugee children (*ensamkommande flyktingbarn*) ranging from 14 to 20 years of age and Elsa and Jenni’s are based on their time in different high school classrooms in Malmö. In Kalle and Elsa’s quotes, both sexual educators acknowledge

²⁶⁸ Leveau, Linda. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23

²⁶⁹ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Kalle). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23.

²⁷⁰ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Elsa). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

²⁷¹ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Jenni). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

that their confidence in the accuracy of *slidkrans* is undermined by their perceived identities as Swedish (“Swedish-ness” will be discussed further in a later section). Jenni and Elsa both comment on changing the understanding of sexuality for students who are in part basing their status, their prestige within their peer group on sexual experience or lack thereof. The role of purity and prestige further complicates the sexual educator’s job in shifting the students’ understanding of virginity and *slidkrans*.

Another side of acceptance is the sexual educators’ gender identity. Our conversation with Alán included a good example of how his gender identity was the basis of questioning and doubt.

There are some kids that have their sexual education by a school teacher by like a biology teacher or a school nurse or so on and they unfortunately have explained about the hymen the way it’s supposed to be, not the correct way, sometimes they trust their words more than my words, especially because I’m a guy. ‘What do you know about the female genitals? You don’t have it.’ Especially sometimes girls, like ‘How do you know about that?’ Then I bring up that I’m a sexual educator with RFSU.²⁷²

For the students Alán was working with, the issue of trust was paramount. As students they had been told by other teachers or nurses, ones who they met with frequently and had already established a relationship with, that there was a hymen and that it could break. As a perceived outsider to the group, Alán enters and contradicts what their teacher or nurse has taught them. Alán’s identity as a “guy” further undermines his position, and the students’ acceptance of *slidkrans*, but is presumably redeemed by his association with RFSU. The acceptance of *slidkrans* for these students was directly tied to trust built through Alán’s association with RFSU.

Linda’s experiences dealt more directly with the confrontation between *mödomshinna* and *slidkrans* in our discussion. She explained,

²⁷² Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

...like 80-90% about *slidkrans* when I talked about that were just like, 'yeah of course' and some of them were like this: 'But how do you know this is true?' Because I've been told and I have seen and I have read the science. In one of those cases we agreed that, ok you don't think it is true but you can see the problems speaking about *slidkrans* and *mödomshinna* and that you lose your virginity like you 'whoops!' [makes a motion of throwing something over her shoulder]...dropped it.²⁷³

Here Linda explicitly challenges the students and other educators to reconsider what virginity means from the anatomical representations to the cultural based prestige discourses that define a person's social status. However, not all of the educators were as direct as Linda with the students in pointing out the complications of *mödomshinna* as both a word and a concept. Instead, other sexual educators saw their job as "planting the seed"²⁷⁴ so students could realize the difference in meaning on their own accord.

The disbelief that all of the sexual educators have experienced when introducing *slidkrans* was attributed to many different circumstances. As Elsa explained, "...it is always very complicated to change someone's mind, even if they can feel their own body and see how it is, it's still in their imagination and that stuff is the hardest part...it's not like you can brainwash them...I feel that sometimes my work is just to plant the seed."²⁷⁵ The position that sexual educators are not there to change minds but simply present a different approach seems at first glance to be somewhat contradictory to the authority that all of the sexual educators place on RFSU. However, this contradiction is a tool for RFSU and facilitates their push for an internal and personal decision on what virginity means; which will be discussed in the following section.

²⁷³ Leveau, Linda. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23.

²⁷⁴ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Elsa). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

²⁷⁵ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Elsa). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

So far there has not been a study that measures the acceptance of *slidkrans* into the Swedish lexicon. However, *slidkrans* was included on last year's (2009) list of new important words by *Språkrådet*, the Swedish Language Council, which "was a huge success and step number one" according to Olle.²⁷⁶ Only time will tell if *slidkrans* as a concept and a word will enter the everyday language and the *Svenska Akademiens Ordlista* (Swedish Academy's word list), but the word *slidkrans* continues to be spread through the media and by sexual educators. As Cameron and Kulick explain, "Language...is not just a medium for sex and health education but something that must be discussed explicitly as part of the process."²⁷⁷ The power of the word, the authority of RFSU introducing it and its acceptance are all profoundly influenced by the role of who is speaking about *slidkrans*. Sexual educators, doctors and teachers all play a role in shifting the discourse on virginity and the hymen in Sweden. The following section will consider how *slidkrans* is being used in educational ways.

5.2 EDUCATION

Since the introduction of *slidkrans* in 2008, concepts around virginity and the hymen were given more emphasis in regard to the spreading of information. This section will look at how the introduction of *slidkrans* has affected sex educators, how the booklet is constructed, how young people are affected by concepts of prestige and how education has been used to spread RFSU's new construction of sexuality in Sweden.

5.2.1 EDUCATION BEFORE THE INTRODUCTION OF SLIDKRANS

All of our participants felt that the introduction of the word *slidkrans* was a much-needed addition to the language and an important tool when educating people about sexuality. Many of our participants brought up feelings of frustration to describe discussions around the hymen while using the word *mödomshinna*, before

²⁷⁶ Castelius, Olle. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

²⁷⁷ Cameron & Kulick 2003, 155

the new word was introduced. The RFSU International Program Director and midwife noted, “different people within RFSU have been holding small lectures on anatomical issues for a number of years actually and *mödomshinna* is not really a very good word. So people have used other words trying to describe what this is and to replace *mödomshinna* with something else.”²⁷⁸

One of our participants brought up the lack of knowledge around the hymen in Swedish society and the need for further education. Kalle reflected on his own sexual education in school when he stated, “Well, I really think this should be written in biology books; it wasn’t in my book as far as I remember.”²⁷⁹ Kalle went on to say, “I talked to people, friends, at parties and things, and most of them have no knowledge about it at all. There’s some that say, ‘Oh, of course’ because they want to appear like they know a lot about sex.”²⁸⁰

Many of the participants we spoke to said the *slidkrans* booklet provided new information that they use when educating others. Others said they knew about the hymen’s elasticity before but could not remember where they received the information. To become a RFSU sexual educator, one must go through several evenings of training and two full-day training sessions. The sessions include a discussion about the hymen and how to discuss virginity with students. RFSU sexual educators are also provided with RFSU informational booklets, including the *slidkrans* booklet.

The introduction of *slidkrans* has also led RFSU to create more discussions around virginity and sexuality. Still, participants noted people have always had questions and concerns about virginity. Jenni, who has worked a sexual educator for many years stated, “Since the word *slidkrans* was introduced I’ve actually talked even

²⁷⁸ Rogala, Christina. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

²⁷⁹ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Kalle). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23.

²⁸⁰ *ibid*

more about virginity and the hymen because the kids themselves have thoughts about it. Of course since the word was introduced it's been placed more on the agenda."²⁸¹

5.2.2 THE SLIDKRANS BOOKLET

The *slidkrans* booklet has been the basis of many sexual educators' knowledge of the hymen. The booklet is 20 pages long and very small (about 12cm x 12cm), which matches with RFSU's other booklets about, for example, clitoris sex or anal sex. The cover of the booklet is decorated with red and pink chrysanthemums. This cover fits with the organic theme, for example, the anal sex booklet has an orange on the cover. The flowers are in soft focus and hint at female genitals. Inside, the booklet is replete with color drawings of different hymens.

The booklet is set up in a question and answer format. Each question and answer takes up no more than two pages of text or three pages of the booklet, including drawings. The questions include "What does the vaginal corona look like?," "Does it hurt the 'first time,'" "Do you bleed the first time?," "Can the vaginal corona break when you ride a bike or horse?," "What is meant by 'breaking the hymen?,'" "Does penis length make a difference?," "Virginity – what does it mean?," "Is it possible to see or feel whether a woman has had sex?," "Can the corona be stitched up?," "What happens if the procedure is still performed?," and "Can you tell from a woman's corona if she has suffered sexual assault?"²⁸²

These questions were selected because RFSU viewed them as the most relevant. RFSU's Press Officer stated, "we were in contact with mostly women but also men, we realized that knowledge about female genital parts was not always accurate and a lot of people still believed that there was a hymen - a lid that had to be broken."²⁸³ The RFSU International Program Director and midwife noted from her countless years of experience with sexuality issues that people have always had

²⁸¹ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Jenni). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

²⁸² RFSU 2008 (translation from *Vaginal Corona*)

²⁸³ Castelius, Olle. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

concerns about virginity and the hymen: “But for a young man or a young woman, uh, first time intercourse there are questions: Will it hurt? Will it bleed? Will I be able to penetrate the...? And all these...and I think that these can, can.....fact that haven’t gotten the real facts can worry people and cause problems that are unnecessary.”²⁸⁴

The booklet as a whole is not aimed at a particular demographic; instead, the booklet attempts to appeal to the whole of society. RFSU’s International Program Director and midwife spoke about the significance of addressing men as well as women when she stated, “in our telephone council we have gotten these phone calls from men: ‘How can I know?’ ‘She said...but I didn’t feel anything...it was so easy the first time.’ So yeah, I think it’s really important for young men.”²⁸⁵

The booklet also speaks to younger people, older people, people with different ethnicities and people with different class backgrounds. Many of the topics addressed are not specific to any group aside from the discussion of hymen surgery; this will be discussed in a later section of the analysis. The RFSU International Program Director and midwife, who was instrumental in creating the booklet’s text, had a story about an older man that was powerfully affected by the booklet’s publication: “I had a very interesting phone call. It was from a man who was in his 70s, he said...and he said, he congratulated RFSU for this little book and he said that it would have been good for him if he had knew this when he was newly married. Because he doubted that his wife, that it was the first time for his wife... and that had... tortured him during the years...”²⁸⁶

The short discussion on virginity is especially interesting for its attempt to redefine how many people commonly regard virginity. This section refutes the heteronormative concept of virginity as first penile-vaginal penetration. The booklet states:

²⁸⁴ Rogala, Christina. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

²⁸⁵ *ibid*

²⁸⁶ Rogala, Christina. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

Virginity is a vague concept based on perceptions and myths, chiefly concerning female sexuality, that RFSU would not wish to endorse. For one thing, virginity is often associated with a heteronormative view of sex restricted to penetrative intercourse between man and woman (in other words, insertion of the penis into the vagina). Additionally, the opposite of virginity (in Swedish, *oskuld*) is guilt (*skuld*). You are not guilty because you've had sex or should feel guilt because you've had it. Some women are affected by these myths, for example through rumor-spreading or violence. At RFSU we sometimes receive questions about how to know whether or not you are a "virgin." You are the only person who can decide that. Different people have different ideas about which sexual acts constitute a "loss of virginity." Some people restrict it to vaginal intercourse, while others count other activities as well.²⁸⁷

In this sense, RFSU does not attempt to eliminate the concept of virginity. Instead, the concept becomes personalized so societal notions of virginity become completely irrelevant. It becomes impossible to judge whether one has passed this rite of passage if each person has a different standard of measurement. Thus the rite of passage is still present, yet the pressure to pass such a rite of passage is removed.

5.2.3 TEACHING ABOUT THE HYMEN

RFSU's education about the hymen takes place in school classrooms (grades 6-12, which encompasses elementary school and high school), child refugee residences and fairs for girls. Schools can request sexual educators from RFSU. Most often, the school will have three sessions, each lasting from one to two hours. There are different activities and discussions for the sexual educators to follow for each session, which is designed and outlined by the local RFSU office. In Malmö, sexual educators are sent out in pairs so there is never a single sexual educator alone in the classroom in order to reduce the potential for harassment while allowing a greater range of knowledge and experience. The classroom groups are not usually split up by gender; instead, sexual educators teach both males and females at the same time. Classroom sizes can range from just a handful of students to groups of more than 30,

²⁸⁷ RFSU 2008, 14-15 (Partial translation from RFSU 2008, *Vaginal Corona*)

depending on how the school itself arranges the classes. The classes are voluntary and students are free to leave if they do not wish to partake.

The role of the sex educator is not to act as a lecturer who has some kind of all-encompassing knowledge of sexuality; instead, sex educators attempt to create discussions among the students by creating an atmosphere in which discussion about sexuality is welcomed while addressing students' concerns. During the first session, the sex educators may lead an activity in which the students bring up words they associate with sexuality, grouping the words and then furthering a discussion about the concepts, including what positive and negative associations are present. For example, students might include the words "one night stand, fuck buddy, boyfriend, girlfriend" when naming things associated with sex; these words can be used to discuss what sort of relationships one can have with a sexual partner and then the positive and negative sides the students assign to each category.

The second school session usually involves value exercises, meaning students can choose whether they agree, disagree or have another answer to a particular statement that is read, such as "Women's sexual drive is as strong as men's." The point of this session is to open up a further dialogue with the students and to further communication between the students in regard to their values. The only statement that has some sort of "correct" answer is the statement about the hymen: "There is a virginity membrane [*mödomshinna*]." This statement provides the sex educator with an opportunity to explain (most likely for the second time) that the hymen does not completely cover the vagina and is no way related to virginity.

The third session most often includes a short lecture about STIs and practical information about condoms, including a demonstration using a real condom and a wooden phallus. One of the most important points is for students to discover other sides to themselves, learn to be open to new information and learn about what other students have to say about sex. The sex educators are not supposed to be able to answer all of the students' questions, but the sex educator must be able to refer students to further information, including local youth clinics (which perform STI

tests, offer counseling services, offer abortion referrals and birth control pills, all for free and without informing an underage person's parents or guardians), the RFSU website and information about RFSL, an organization centered around rights for homosexuals, bisexuals and transgendered people.

RFSU in Malmö has also been present at girls' fairs, with *slidkrans* as the main theme of discussion. At these public fairs, girls (usually teenagers but sometimes younger or older) were asked to take a quiz about the hymen. There were two girls' fairs in 2010: one in Malmö and one in Landskrona. In Landskrona, the girls could enter a drawing for prizes after taking the quiz.²⁸⁸ There were extremely few girls that knew of the term *slidkrans*, and some girls did not even know the word *mödomshinna*. The quiz has about ten "circle the answer" questions, and included questions about where the hymen was located, whether it was normal to bleed upon first vaginal penetration and if the hymen could be gotten rid of. For one sex educator present, not a single girl got all of the questions right. The purpose of the quiz was to further discussion; the sexual educators were encouraged to discuss each question with the girls and their thoughts. Arguably, the most important message was to assure girls that vaginal penetration does not have to cause bleeding or be painful, as many girls originally thought.

5.2.4 SEX, VIRGINITY AND PRESTIGE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

In Sweden, there are still double standards in regards to the sexuality of boys and girls and men and women. While Sweden is often stereotyped as a gender-equal, sexually free nation, in many schools, prestige-based systems of sexuality still play an important role. Hammarén found that whether or not a girl is thought to be "cheap" or not is subjective and can often be placed on a scale depending on how many partners she's had, how "easy" it was to sleep with her and whether she was in love with her past partners.²⁸⁹ It is important to note it is not the reality that counts but

²⁸⁸ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Karin). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 15th.

²⁸⁹ Hammarén 2008, 173

whether or not it is *said by others* to be a certain way. Therefore, girls/women who were extremely “cheap” are rumored to have many casual partners who she performed sexual acts with after little hesitation and with whom she supposedly does not have any feelings for. The sting of being called a whore, or *hora*, (regardless of sexual behavior) is a common high school experience for many girls in Sweden, and in many ways, the worst insult for a teenage girl.²⁹⁰ Sex educators often bring these issues up in the classroom in order to highlight how women’s sexuality is often stigmatized in Swedish society.

Ortner and Whitehead’s concepts of prestige can be applied to those young people who are “virgins” and those who are not “virgins” in Sweden. In Hammarén’s study at a Swedish high school in the suburbs of Gothenburg, he found virginity was a kind of stigma among boys.²⁹¹ Boys who were still considered virgins had less status than those not considered virgins. Karin commented on this sort of prestige when she stated, “It is very divided between the kids that have done it and those that haven’t – or say they have. I feel like its more important for those kids that haven’t had sex, they become very attached to the thing – losing your virginity.”²⁹² Often, concerns about virginity norms can cause anxiety among young people. Jenni stated that “everyone thinks, ‘Oh, everyone is so much younger than I am’ or will be, or such, and you can put holes in that myth, so to say, and you say that most are not 14 years old like they might think, they’re actually between 16 and 17 years of age and then they feel more normal.”²⁹³ The desire to complete the ritual of losing one’s virginity can create a strong psychological hold on many young people, especially if they feel like they are past a certain age, or if everyone else has claimed to have attained. The ritual of the “loss” of virginity is thus a status marker for many males and females in

²⁹⁰ See Ambjörnsson (2007) for a more in-depth discussion of the word *hora* and its effects and use by the teenage girls in her study

²⁹¹ Hammarén 2008, 170

²⁹² Interview with a sex educator (alias: Karin). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 15.

²⁹³ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Jenni). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

Sweden, and one that education about *slidkrans* subtly calls for eradication by claiming the loss of one's virginity is how the individual herself/himself defines it: masturbation, oral sex, anal sex or other sexual activities.

Sex education can be used as a tool to implement a sexuality that questions the prestige systems present in many schools. RFSU sex educators are trained to first ask the class how they would like to refer to the male and female genitals during the sex education sessions. A discussion is then sparked about the differences between the different words for genitals, the contexts they are used in (doctor's office, with friends, as a small child) and whether they are positively or negatively culturally imbued. At the end of the discussion, the class decides on which word they would like to use during the sex education sessions. For male genitals, the choice is usually *kuk*, or cock. For female genitals, the choices can range from the constructed-for-children *snippa*, to the more clinical *underliv*, to the more derogatory (with hopes to be reclaimed) *fitta*. A discussion about the word *fitta* can call into question why this word, which is often translated into English as "cunt," is so extremely derogatory while the commonly regarded male equivalent, *kuk*, is not as powerful in Swedish society. Pointing out this double standard is one way to call into question a prestige system in which female genitals are seen as dirty or can be used to insult others and tear into the myth of equality between males and females in Sweden.

5.2.5 EDUCATION STRATEGIES

Sexual educators use many different strategies to convey information about the hymen. In general, sex educators do not hand out a copy of the booklet to students due to a shortage of printed copies. Instead, many sexual educators note the booklet is available free for download (along with other booklets on clitoris sex, condoms and anal sex) on RFSU's website.

Education about the hymen can be approached in many different ways depending on the class and the sexual educator. One strategy is to first bring up virginity. Then the sexual educator can ask, "What is virginity?" The students often

answer in many different ways, but typically virginity is viewed in terms of penetration; generally, vaginal penetration. From this jumping-off point, the sexual educator can then bring up homosexuality and how the view of virginity is often heteronormative by asking if two lesbian women are still virgins even if they've had sex countless times (without vaginal penetration). Many students have responded to this question by stating that homosexuals have a different way of measuring virginity than non-homosexual people. Within this discussion the sex educator can ask how it is possible to tell if a man or woman is a virgin. Generally, students will respond that it's possible to tell because an intact hymen is an indicator of a girl's intact virginity. The sex educator can then explain about the anatomy of the hymen and conclude that just like males, there are no indicators of virginity for females.

Many young people had concerns about virginity. Many questions revolved around sexual norms in Sweden, especially the age of average first penetrative intercourse, which many viewed as "sex." Many students feel pressure to have had sex by a certain age, and a discussion about the hymen can also assure them that they should have sex when they feel ready, not by some arbitrary standard. One sex educator, Jenni, uses concerns about the "right" age to lose one's virginity to bring up the hymen:

Normally, it fits in, 'How old are Swedes when they first have sex?'.. it's usually how I bring it up because everyone thinks 'Oh, everyone is so much younger than I am' or will be, or such, and you can put holes in that myth, so to say, and you say that most are not 14 years old like they might think, they're actually between 16 and 17 years of age...²⁹⁴

Within the discussion of virginity, there are many ways to explain how the hymen works. The operations manager for the Elektra Project explained he uses levity and physical demonstrations to demonstrate the hymen did not fully cover the vaginal opening; a cup and plastic wrap was thus a unique way to demonstrate that if the

²⁹⁴ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Jenni). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

hymen fully covered the vagina then menstrual blood could not come out.²⁹⁵ Christina stated that in her talks, she uses a rubber band or sweater sleeve to illustrate how the hymen does not completely cover the vagina.²⁹⁶

Many sexual educators spoke about attempting to reassure younger people that sex does not have to be painful and bleeding is not a symptom of virginity during their discussion about virginity and the hymen, which often comes as a surprise to younger people. The sex education coordinator in Malmö explained, “I think the biggest purpose with sex education is to clear out all the misunderstandings and to....to reduce all theworries about when you go to have sex with someone and if you’re really, really scared about the pain and all of the blood that’s not healthy and we need to work with health in school. No one says no to that. And to talk about *slidkrans* is a way to make it ...very smaller.”²⁹⁷

5.2.6 EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

Sex educators can use the concepts *slidkrans* imbues, including virginity, purity and prestige, in order to spark discussions in attempt to construct a new sexuality. Education about the hymen can not only correct misunderstandings that can cause worry, it can also construct a new definition of virginity and thus change the meaning of what many commonly see as “sex” and challenge traditional notions of prestige built around the concept of virginity.

5.3 THE OTHER

This section will explore how the Other’s sexuality has influenced RFSU’s construction of sexuality and ultimately been the catalyst for the change to *slidkrans*. This section will also explore how this new sexuality can affect the Other, including

²⁹⁵ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

²⁹⁶ Rogala, Christina. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

²⁹⁷ Leveau, Linda. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23

some examples by the Elektra Projekt in Malmö and sex education of refugee children as well as purity and prestige among the Other in Sweden.

There is little benefit in dividing groups into ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’ in sexuality research because such terms are difficult to define. *Migrationsverket*, the Swedish Migration Board, does not have an accepted definition for the word ‘immigrant,’²⁹⁸ and as we have explored in chapter four, many of those born and raised in Sweden readily identify as immigrants, while others who may not have been born in Sweden yet live there are not regarded by others or themselves as immigrants, depending on their background and appearance. Hammarén writes that some of his participants identified an immigrant, as Swedish, or as neither an immigrant nor Swedish depending on the context of the interaction.²⁹⁹ Often the terms ‘immigrant’ and ‘Swede’ are used so often without exploring the meaning and nuances behind them that they lose any sort of significance. For the purpose of this discussion, we will use the term ‘the Other’ to denote those not regarded by others as Swedish yet live (often permanently) in Sweden and are characterized by the media as unenlightened, dark-skinned, oppressors (if male) and oppressed (if female), as previously discussed in chapter three.

5.3.1 NAVIGATING A MINEFIELD

The debate around the Other and sexuality, including hymen surgeries, which was outlined in the previous chapter, became the catalyst to introduce the word *slidkrans*. Still, there was some debate over how to approach the issue. The Director of Programs referenced the debate around “honor” and the Other when stating:

Then of course there has been a lot of debates in Sweden for the last I don’t know 10...15 years or so, that is much related to the fact that people come from other parts of the world where the ...honor and virginity is very much connected...and...this has started discussions in...what do you say reconstruction..?of the hymen and should that be done. Because some girls really fear that they will be maybe killed

²⁹⁸ Migrationsverket 2010

²⁹⁹ Hammarén 2008, 336

or pushed away from their family if they don't get that... and how should we look at these things? Because obviously I say in a Swedish context most people think...you are quite honorable even if you have lost your virginity ...and still you want to help people and you want to be sort of, be listening to these girls. So what to do and how to go about it...and we got a lot of questions from these groups but also from, also from, uh, how do I say...ordinary, very long back Swedish girls who were maybe worried about: Will it hurt? What will happen? Will I bleed? etc. because there is a lot of misconceptions and then we realized that instead of just discussing reconstruction or not, or discussing this as an issue to that only belongs in the group of immigrants or something.....it's better to view the concept of...or the misconception of the hymen and bring that up. So that was, the, I think the, discussion within RFSU and I think that is probably why it came now...³⁰⁰

This excerpt demonstrates the potential conflict in how to address a public issue, attempt to aid society as a whole, correct misconceptions and not stigmatize certain groups in society. To see certain issues as belonging only to 'immigrants' is to create divisions in society. Problems of hymen surgeries thus becomes an issue of 'them,' the Other, who are culturally different from 'us.'

RFSU instead creates a sexuality which does not divide the Other from 'normal' society. Alán outlined this view by saying, "So I think this is the general view of the platform of RFSU, we try not to talk so much about culture and that's also thanks to a lot of people that have really put a lot of effort into... leave this type of ideology to get into a new one that we have today."³⁰¹ The way in which the *slidkrans* booklet was written exemplifies this.

The *slidkrans* booklet does not appeal to just one particular demographic, as previously discussed. One way to bypass the debate centered on the Other's sexuality was to maintain a serious, clinical tone in the writing of the booklet. The RFSU Program Director stated, "I think we saw that this very.....concrete, anatomical,

³⁰⁰ Andersson, Maria. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

³⁰¹ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

sexual thing was something that was up to us to write. No one else would probably do that.”³⁰² The writing style of the booklet is formal through the use of its clinical tone. The small size of the booklet calls for simplicity. The *slidkrans* booklet does address hymen surgeries directly by asking and answering the questions, “Can the hymen be stitched up?” and “What happens if the procedure is still performed?” The booklet goes on to say that hymen surgeries “help to maintain patriarchal structures and a prejudiced view of women and their sexuality”³⁰³ and that generally, surgery is not helpful because of its uncertain result. Instead, the booklet recommends non-surgical therapy for those who feel pressure to undergo hymen surgery. In this sense, the booklet refrains from creating a division in Swedish society between ‘immigrants’ and ‘Swedes’ by stating *the surgery itself* supports patriarchal structures but not those that *come from a particular culture*. Instead of attacking ‘honor cultures’ which have ‘virginity norms,’ as has been highly reported in the Swedish media, the RFSU booklet attacks the surgery itself, and in an underhanded fashion, the doctors which perform the Swedish surgery despite unreliable results when non-surgical counseling has found to have positive outcomes. Divisive buzzwords common in the Swedish media and among politicians, such as ‘honor cultures,’ ‘honor killings,’ ‘virginity norms’ and ‘honor-related violence’ are not present in the booklet.

The message of the booklet seems to be that since virginity is a null concept and cannot be detected, individuals are free to engage in sexual relations at their own will. Sex educators teach students that the right time to have sex is when the individual herself/himself decides is the right time with consenting partner(s). This, of course, does not exclude remaining abstinent, however one wishes to, or waiting until marriage to have “sex.” The emphasis is on the individual’s choice, making clear that it is not the choice of the individual’s family or friends, who may have differing values. While some may regard this as a message of assimilation, it is important to emphasize

³⁰² Andersson, Maria. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

³⁰³ RFSU 2008, 17

that it is an idealized message, and one that is built on the non-static nature of sexuality. The stereotyped view of sexuality of Swedish people as gender-equal and sexually liberated has been shown to be just that, a stereotype, yet an idealized stereotype and one that many believe should be worked toward.

5.3.2 SEX EDUCATION OF REFUGEE CHILDREN

A few of our participants identified the sex education of refugee children as one area of assimilation conflict involving the Other. RFSU sends sexual educators to child refugee centers in Malmö for general sexual education funded by the government. The goal of the sex education seems twofold: educating individuals about their bodies and protecting the general Swedish society from potential problems associated with sexual contact from members of such a “risk group.” In many ways, the refugee children occupy a vulnerable position in society: Their residency status is not assured, meaning they may be forced to return to their “home” country; they are in a country without an adult guardian; they cannot speak the language upon arrival; and are viewed by some as a drain on resources.

Each group usually has three sessions, each lasting two and a half hours, during which the hymen is usually brought up when discussing female sexual anatomy. These children come to Sweden seeking refugee status without an accompanying adult. The children come from a variety of countries, including Afghanistan and Cambodia, just to name a few and almost all of them are male. The sessions are conducted with the help of interpreter(s). Kalle explained how he introduces the discussion of the hymen:

You ask what virginity is, and draw female genitals, and then we explain... what they believe, about virginity, and cultural things, that a woman should be a virgin, that women should bleed during the first time, and we ask, “What is it that makes them bleed?” and they all answer that it’s a membrane that ruptures, and that in certain places, like Lebanon, Syria and Japan they sell blood capsules so you show

there's an industry for women's sexuality.. But that's a way to get into it, with virginity ...³⁰⁴

Jenni noted in her interview that many refugee children were curious about the average age of first “intercourse” in Sweden and often believed that it was much younger than the reality. This is most likely due to the stereotype of Sweden as a country full of sexually active, sexually “liberated” people. She played on this stereotype to introduce the hymen.

Some of our participants spoke about conflicts during the sessions with refugee children. The following two quotations (one of which has already been discussed but in another context) address this issue:

“Someone raised their hand and said, ‘You say one thing but I’ve been taught something different, why do you think you’re right?’ which is a good question, and it was a hard question because we couldn’t explain patriarchal structures, oppression, and such but we’re not going to criticize their way of seeing things, that’s not what we’re doing, but we said that research shows that there’s no membrane, except in a few cases, but we didn’t mention that.”³⁰⁵

“...but then when you talk to people that are more like...cultural focused...and have a very traditional...background it’s harder to like *really* get it in. Like they’re kind of stuck in this structure, and like, it’s so threatened by the word... because I think that a lot of people that doesn’t come from Sweden, like they have also this loyalty to another country, where they come from and they can see this word...*slidkrans* a little bit like ‘this is a *Swedish* thing’ like this is a part of the *Swedish-ization* that we are going through because we are in another country and we don’t know so much about it...and...like we know we hang out our sheets with blood on it after the wedding...and like they know how it is.”³⁰⁶

From these quotations the conflict site is entrenched with an “us” versus “them” mentality and the word *slidkrans* becomes something foreign, so foreign that it retains a dubious air. Like the *slidkrans* booklet, the best strategy for educating about this construction of sexuality is to limit the amount of information to medical knowledge,

³⁰⁴ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Kalle). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23.

³⁰⁵ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Kalle). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23.

³⁰⁶ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Elsa). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

and in the case of the word *slidkrans*, place it within the context of the female anatomy, yet even then both the ‘Swede’ and the Other may feel provoked. Viewed in another, larger context, the issue may lose its importance. It would be naïve to assume that young ‘immigrants,’ meaning people who have moved from another country, are adopting the same sexualities as that of their parents and grandparents. If sexuality were static, debates around sexuality in Sweden would still be focused on whether sex should be taught in schools, if homosexuality needs to be cured and if young people should be having sex outside the bounds of marriage, as we referenced in the early RFSU debates in the first chapter.

Sex research has demonstrated how migration can influence sexuality. Ahmadi’s 2003 study found that among a group of first-generation immigrant Iranians in Sweden (selected because they constitute the largest Muslim group in Sweden) who had been settled for at least 10 years, most were likely to accept premarital sexual relations within the context of a love relationship after migration from Iran.³⁰⁷ Many of his respondents encouraged pre-marital sexual relations for their children as a way to understand one’s partner.³⁰⁸ This demonstrates how sexualities are not fixed and static; instead, they are contextually constructed and fluid as Foucault claimed.

5.3.3 THE ELEKTRA PROJEKT IN MALMÖ

The Elektra Projekt in Malmö in many ways mirrors how RFSU has dealt with questions of assimilation versus integration. The Elektra Projekt is an organization that, officially, “works against honor-related violence and oppression.”³⁰⁹ In Malmö, the Elektra Projekt deals with issues of sexuality and young people. The organization arranges lessons at local schools, lectures, discussions and much more. Sharaf Heroes and Heroines is a part of the Elektra Projekt which schools young people in human rights issues who can in turn educate others. In Malmö, under the direction of Alán

³⁰⁷ Ahmadi 2003, 692

³⁰⁸ Ahmadi 2003, 694

³⁰⁹ Fryshuset 2010

Ali, who is also a national RFSU board member, the project does not limit itself to immigrant groups; instead, the project takes on society at large in an effort to push for human rights, with an emphasis on gender equality. Alán explained his choice to move the focus away from certain immigrant groups by saying that

In the beginning when Stockholm started this project it was always about to reach youth with roots in the honor culture but we have changed that as well because this is an issue of the society, not an issue of the minorities, for the minorities. So we if we make it a society issue then we have to include people from the society.³¹⁰

Other chapters of Sharaf Heroes has faced criticism for playing into stereotypes about immigrants as being oppressors of women. The media has also focused a lot of attention on Sharaf Heroes in order to showcase ‘model immigrants’ who take a stand against honor-related violence, which further plays into stereotypes of immigrants as oppressors. The 2009 *Dagens Nyheter* article “*Jag vägrar vara förtryckare*” (I Refuse to be an Oppressor), is a story of redemption in which a young Sharaf Hero (note: not in Malmö) with Kurdish roots describes how he used to think that Swedish girls were whores who did not deserve any respect and attempted to control his sister in order to preserve her virginity. At the end of the article the reader learns that the man, after forming a relationship with another immigrant girl, finds that she has been abused because of her contact with him and she is later married against her will to a cousin. After that experience he says, “I felt that I had had enough of the inhuman and brutal male role I had grown up with. I didn’t want to be an oppressor any longer.”³¹¹ The man begins his work with an organization fighting ‘honor culture’ and gives lectures that even his father approves of. This is despite the fact that most Sharaf Heroes state that they do not come from ‘honor culture’ families, according to an evaluative 2006 report.³¹²

³¹⁰ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

³¹¹ Svensson 2009

³¹² Schyltter and Kanakura 2006

The media narrative of the redeemed immigrant male places an individual man who has embraced Swedish values in opposition to other young men, who still hold traditional, sexist views. It is similar to the narrative of the young woman who embraces Swedish values yet the man does not face brutality in return; instead, he stops being violent and oppressive to immigrant women (especially his female relatives) and Swedish females, who he learns to respect. The man's transformation also emphasizes the sexual threat that other "immigrant" men supposedly pose to Swedish society. This media narrative serves to make negative generalizations about "immigrants" while on the surface keeping a positive, non-racist tone, and it is these sort of generalizations that can serve as a minefield for those working for integration and understanding. As Alán stated,

I'm Kurdish, I'm Muslim, I haven't killed anyone yet and I don't plan to kill my sister or mother, go ask them if I've ever tried it and failed, so what about us? There are like hundreds of thousands of boys and we don't oppress women or whatever. So what about us? So we changed that because they were out in the suburbs and they were talking this way then people got very angry because they thought, it doesn't mean that to be a good man you have to be Swedish and this is, really, the discourse of immigrant issues in Sweden, it's like that, you have to assimilate to be a Swede...³¹³

After shifting the focus, the Elektra Projekt created a meeting place for young 'Swedes' and 'immigrants.' Alán explained how 'Swedes' and 'immigrants' were surprised at how the stereotypes of one another revealed themselves to be just that, stereotypes. The 'immigrants' regarded the 'Swedes' as sexually liberated, while the 'Swedes' were able to see how much in common they had with the 'immigrants:'

And we have a lot of like Swedish boys and Swedish girls and they are very much satisfied and they learn to know each other, you know, you should come here and see how it works when the Arabic girls are saying, 'Oh, we can't do anything, our parents don't like us go out late nights and we cannot go to here and we cannot wear whatever we want' and the Swedish girl sits there and says, 'Yeah, same things for

³¹³ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

us, you know, we cannot go out late nights and we cannot have our boyfriends coming out to our house and blah blah' and the girls are actually shocked and they're like, 'but you're Swedish!' They have so much prejudice against each other and they think that just because you're Swedish you can walk without a panty, you can fuck whoever you want, and so on, and this is what the media projects on us. So it's also an integration process where we actually help both the Swedish youth to learn to know non-Swedes and vice versa.³¹⁴

Arguably, one of the most important messages of the project is that someone's background does not determine how they live or what thoughts they have, and the stereotypes often fueled by the media cannot be applied in real-world situations.

After completing all of the classes, the student can become an official Sharaf Hero or Heroine. The students can then go on to work (at an hourly rate set by the union) at schools which have requested them. Elektra in Malmö can spend anywhere from five to eight weeks at a particular school, with sessions lasting from 40 to 80 minutes. The group of Sharaf Hero and Heroines meet at Fryshuset in Malmö a few times each month for discussion.

5.3.4 AVERTING SOCIETAL DIVISION

Two of our participants commented on how many regard virginity as an area reserved for the Other:

I think that there are... some want to see that the problem about young people having worries about the first time is connected to where they come from or where their parents come from – which part of the city they live in.³¹⁵

Sometimes it's hard for them to accept that also the issue of virginity has also been an important issue for Swedes previously and it's so amazing how quick we forget negative things in the society...³¹⁶

³¹⁴ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

³¹⁵ Leveau, Linda. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23.

³¹⁶ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

The first quotation references how the city of Malmö is often divided up by ethnicity; neighborhoods such as Rosengård are primarily inhabited by people who have recently moved to Sweden or families which have a non-Swedish background. As the previous section discussed, young people's concerns about virginity and prestige do play a role in many of their lives. Some sex educators see a difference in how prestige and purity affect 'immigrant' girls. Andersson found that for certain high school 'immigrant' girls, virginity functioned a status marker,³¹⁷ meaning that for mostly girls, virginity could raise their value among men and other women. The role virginity plays within certain groups isn't limited to the categories 'Swede' and 'immigrant;' other researchers should continue the nuanced discussion of the interplay between sexuality, ethnicity, class and nationalism. This does in no way detract from the experiences of young women who are put under so much pressure to remain "virgins" that they seek out hymen surgeries in Sweden. The voices of these people should not be silenced yet their issues should also not be exoticized so that they do not receive the care that they need. Birgitta Essén, who was in charge of a healthcare project attempting to aid young women desiring hymen surgeries in Sweden, suggested in her report that placing too much emphasis on the multicultural nature of what these girls with non-Swedish backgrounds were experiencing led many within the healthcare industry to have a difficult time understanding their position.³¹⁸ As we will explore later, one solution to alienating the Other seems to be to integrate the issues of the Other with that of the society.

The second quotation emphasizes the importance virginity has in Swedish society and hints that Sweden may not be the gender-equal country it is often stereotyped as. Debates around the Other's violence and sexuality can even serve to lessen concerns about 'normal' violence against women in society and its interplay with sexuality. Hammarén discusses this phenomena when he writes, "When a 'Swedish' person expresses sexism, it's viewed as an individual exception to society

³¹⁷ Andersson 2003, 152-154

³¹⁸ Essén 2006

norms but when an ‘immigrant’ expresses sexism then it’s seen as having cultural origins.”³¹⁹ Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on hymen surgeries and honor-related violence in the larger context of gender inequality in Swedish society, which includes the commonality of partner violence in Sweden.

Although concerns about the Other’s sexuality may have sped up the introduction of the word *slidkrans*, it was introduced to the whole of society and seen by many as a much-needed replacement for *mödomshinna*; a replacement which could correct misunderstandings and lead to a new conception of virginity and subsequently a new construction of sexuality. RFSU’s construction of this new sexuality has managed to mitigate the potential for accusations of cultural assimilation by accentuating scientific information rather than constructing a dialogue based on division. The introduction of *slidkrans* demonstrates how a potentially volatile issue can be addressed without creating demarcations cutting off the Other, instead, one can push to see the similarities between different groups in society and work toward goals such as women’s equality with a united front.

5.4 SILENCING THROUGH LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

Silence is a powerful tool that can oppress and subjugate a group. Alternatively, silence can also be used to express dissent or as a means of survival. When considering the part that language plays in expressing sexuality, the structural significance of the silence becomes central to recognizing the different constructions of sexuality.³²⁰ The introduction of *slidkrans* and its subsequent translation have, as seen above, sparked diverse reactions relating to language, education and the Other in Sweden. It is a juncture where sexuality and culture meet and inspire a discussion of cross-cultural sexuality. With these discussions in mind, we will now consider the language of the *slidkrans* booklet and the dangers emphasized by our participants of silencing through translation.

³¹⁹ Hammarén 2008, 323

³²⁰ Cameron & Kulick 2003, 12

5.4.1 SILENCE IN THE LANGUAGE OF SLIDKRANS

The *slidkrans* booklet was conceived and published to “change attitudes and behavior” related to virginity and the hymen.³²¹ The content of the booklet, as discussed in section 5.2.2, emphasizes the anatomical and biological elements. The RFSU Director of Programs explained the booklet “is about anatomy” and includes verbal descriptions and visual examples of what female genitals and the *slidkrans* can look like.³²² The booklet begins with six illustrated examples of *slidkrans* that are followed by a paragraph of text. This paragraph states, “Every woman” has a hymen, which underlines the booklet’s cis perspective.³²³ Thus, RFSU through the *slidkrans* booklet does not challenge the concept of who can identify as “woman” but accepts the normative idea that only someone who exhibited acceptable female genitals at birth is considered a woman. This approach risks silencing the voices of intersex and transgender individuals who identify themselves as women.

In her book *Sexing the Body*, Anne Fausto-Sterling directly challenges the type of narrow view the *slidkrans* booklet presents of sexual identity.³²⁴ With the aim to show “how scientists create truths about sexuality; how our bodies incorporate and confirm these truths; and how these truths, sculpted by the social milieu in which biologists practice their trade, in turn refashion our cultural environment” the book breaks down the biologically determined sex binary.³²⁵ Fausto-Sterling’s work challenges both elements of the factual, scientific basis for discussing sexuality as well as the part that language plays in establishing what is normal in terms of sexuality. As previously established, many of our participants discussed the booklet’s factual basis and praise the research behind the new word, *slidkrans*. Yet, these facts,

³²¹ Andersson, Maria. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

³²² Ibid

³²³ RFSU 2008, 5

³²⁴ 2000

³²⁵ Fausto-Sterling 2000, 5

as Fausto-Sterling argues, are contextually constructed in the midst of the political, social and economic struggles.³²⁶

RFSU's principles and policies state, "that gender patterns which limit our freedom to be, to choose or to enjoy should be fought against."³²⁷ These principles include, and in the Swedish version directly mention, trans and intersex individuals. And yet, while working toward a more liberal and accurate concept of virginity, RFSU effectively denies the existence of intersex and transgender individuals through the language of the *slidkrans* booklet. However, based on RFSU's principles and policies it is likely that this silencing was unintentional.

5.4.2 SILENCING THROUGH TRANSLATION: AT HOME AND ABROAD

The *slidkrans* booklet does not only silence other sexual identities; the booklet also potentially silences through its translations. *Slidkrans* has been directly translated into three languages besides Swedish. In English it is (Vaginal Corona), in Arabic (المهبل {الكليل} تاج) and in Sorani (ئێزێ قەمەڵێه).³²⁸ Sharing translations of *slidkrans* internationally was not part of RFSU's original plan for the word, though. The RFSU Press Officer noted:

Launching the English version was thought of mainly as a Swedish thing. We haven't planned going international. But writing the media release for the Swedish media I figured this could be an 'international talk of the day'—'look here there is a small country in the far north that has a small and obscure organization doing sexuality education...*(laughing)*...and what are they doing? They are trying to change...three other languages that they don't even master'...*still laughing*...I thought that that could be something that was joked about, written about but also hopefully leading to a discussion about the hymen...the word hymen. That wasn't the original plan; the original plan was mainly Swedish.³²⁹

³²⁶ Ibid

³²⁷ RFSU 2003, 7

³²⁸ RFSU

³²⁹ Castelius, Olle. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

As Olle explained, the international part of the introduction of *slidkrans* was not the initial goal. This is clear through the content of the booklet, which offers advice on Swedish organizations that can be contacted to help with questions relating to sexuality. The primary way our participants discussed translation was in reference to the child refugees that the RFSU sexual educators meet with. According to the sexual educators, they rely solely upon outside translators to communicate with the children. Having the information translated through an additional person prompted different reactions among the educators. Kalle and Karin recalled the collaboration fondly but both noted a similar complication. Kalle thought, “it worked really well but there was one interpreter and we weren’t sure if he translated everything we wanted him to translate, but otherwise it worked really well.”³³⁰ While Karin explained,

I’m a bit surprised because it went very well...but it was hard too [...] So there were three translators, so we had to repeat everything once over again, so it was very time consuming. We had one problem with one of the translators because we said one thing that lasted for two minutes and then he spoke for 10 minutes, so it was very clear that he didn’t say what we said...so we had some trust issues.³³¹

Here both Kalle and Karin at first seem to want to gloss over the complicating and “Other-ing” element of cross-cultural and multi-linguistic discussions of sexuality. Meanwhile, when Elsa was asked about her experiences with translators, she replied:

It’s very hard because this word [*slidkrans*] doesn’t exist in their languages...so like when we try to talk about it they have to...well they take the old word and they kind of make it...not the old word, but then it’s not the right thing because here we actually have a substitute word for, like this is the word instead that we are going to use...so yeah that is a problem, so you can’t even...like use the word...³³²

All three of these comments focus on two fundamental issues—translation and trust. Without the context of authority and trust that RFSU has earned over the past century

³³⁰ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Kalle). 2010. Interviewed by Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 23.

³³¹ Interview with a sex educator (alias: Karin). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 15th.

³³² Interview with a sex educator (alias: Elsa). 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9th.

in Sweden, the children who the sexual educators meet with do not have the same faith in the information the educators are sharing. The contextual understanding and construction of sexuality become paramount in relaying information to the children. A common ground, established via translators, is built in hopes of imparting this knowledge. A similar problem was discussed in our interview with Alán.

Part of the translation was spurred by word of mouth and through NGO networks. As Alán explains in the quote below, he was directly involved in spreading *slidkrans* to Kurdistan:

I got involved with some NGOs and they asked me if I wanted to go to Kurdistan and to work there for a month. So last year me and my colleague, Roshne from here, she is also Kurdish, went back to Kurdistan with this NGO and we started to work with different NGOs there [...] So I was working there and I saw this good work and I was impressed. And then I took the *slidkrans* with me and actually had some lectures about that and I did a lecture for about 20-30 NGOs and women's organizations and one of them in particular was so impressed and they liked it so much that they wanted to have a meeting afterwards to get this praktika [booklet] and translate it into Kurdish so we had a few meetings and they wanted to do that.³³³

However, this instance of intellectual sharing was tarnished by a translation error as Alán continued explaining:

They [RFSU] translated [to Sorani] the word 'penis' they wrote, 'cock.' So even if it were to be in an English journal or whatever people would have reacted [...] they [Kurdish NGO] just started to copy that [the booklet] and give it to a lot of people and then when the reaction came from the, like the society, then they got back to RFSU and said 'Oh, this is wrong, you shouldn't use this word. And you have to like take it back' and blah blah and anyway it was just because they had written the word 'cock' in some areas and some other words that were not proper to use in a scientific script. And it's not so easy to find the right word in some languages because sexuality in itself is a

³³³ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

complex issue and in some areas in the world you don't talk about sexuality...³³⁴

In these quotes, Alán highlights a number of problems that the translation of *slidkrans* can provoke. His initial critique of mistranslating the word 'penis' was promptly addressed by RFSU as the Press Officer explained "...what we have done is we have added short text in the beginning of the booklet now, saying that we've had this problem and when we write about the male reproductive organ we use this word and we now understand that this could effect some feelings..."³³⁵ The broader question Alán touches on of how to translate words and speak about sexuality, especially in contexts where sexuality is silenced or not spoken of in a public way is a tricky one. Through the interviews with RFSU staff, it became clear that RFSU's intentions were to challenge the previous notions of virginity with the introduction of *slidkrans* and while their methods may be appropriate for a Swedish context based on their aforementioned authority, these same methods may not be appropriate for other contexts.

RFSU is not the first (nor will it be the last) organization to share their work at an international level. The book, *Our Bodies Ourselves (OBOS)* produced by the American based Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC) can be used as a good comparison to RFSU's introduction *slidkrans*.³³⁶ *OBOS* was first introduced as a small pamphlet produced by a group of like-minded women in 1970 and grew into a book a year later.³³⁷ Within the next two decades, the book was translated and appeared in Western Europe, later spreading to Asia, South America, Africa and Eastern Europe.³³⁸ Of these more than 30 translations, very few can be considered

³³⁴ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

³³⁵ Castelius, Olle. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

³³⁶ Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* can also serve as a good comparison. For further discussion see Wairimū Ngarūiya Njambi 2009, "One Vagina To Go: Eve Ensler's Universal Vagina and its Implications for African Women"

³³⁷ Davis 2007, 22

³³⁸ Ibid, 53-58

direct as most were adapted to be contextually relevant and appropriate, focusing on the experiences of local women.³³⁹ While the BWHBC initially made an effort to guarantee that at least a part of each chapter from the American *OBOS* would appear in the translated versions, they eventually recognized the difficulties that ideologically charged issues could cause for the local organization producing the book and moved away from this interventionist approach allowing the translators and local feminist groups to have authority over the content.³⁴⁰

The global trajectory of *OBOS* does not differ so much from the hopes that RFSU participants expressed for *slidkrans*. The RFSU Director of Programs explained, "...we want to...we are going to have a discussion...we are a member of IPPF [International Planned Parenthood Federation] so we hope to bring up a discussion with them if they would be interested in translating it [*slidkrans* booklet] to different languages..."³⁴¹ Like BWHBC, RFSU does not have the financial ability to support a global dissemination of the *slidkrans* booklet, but through their partnership with other (in this case larger) organizations they hope to spread the word. When asked how RFSU would translate the booklet, the Director of Programs replied, "We probably have to review it...but most of it I would say is about anatomy and that is the same really [...] maybe there are different things you want to stress considering the culture."³⁴² This strict anatomical view of the booklet's contents does not take into account how science mediates what is possible in a construction of sexuality. The contextually created discourses of prestige that regulate sexuality, as Alán noted, cannot be rearticulated without contextually relevant material in the booklet.

The comparison of *slidkrans* to the international circulation and adaptation of *OBOS* is valuable because it offers some insight into the possible trajectory of *slidkrans*. Without reasonable attention to the translations and adaptation of ideas and

³³⁹ *ibid*, 63-67

³⁴⁰ *ibid*, 58-79

³⁴¹ Andersson, Maria. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

³⁴² Andersson, Maria. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper. Digital audio recording. Stockholm, March 31.

words—as exhibited by the Sorani example—based on the BWHBC’s experience with *OBOS*, it is likely that *slidkrans* will not be embraced nearly as quickly or enthusiastically as RFSU hopes. While the introduction in Swedish has been lauded by Språkrådet and accepted by medical and laypersons alike, as Alán illustrated, sexuality and virginity are “complex issues.”³⁴³ The repression of conversations around sexuality in Kurdistan that Alán references calls into question the aims of RFSU in disseminating *slidkrans*. The issue at hand is not the crossing of borders, but rather, the recognition of those “fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears and containment that those borders represent.”³⁴⁴ If the translated booklets lack proper contextual presentation of the facts, the booklet could silence any fruitful discussion of virginity and the hymen. The combined question of different constructions of prestige discourses and understandings of purity heavily influence the cross-cultural discussion of *slidkrans* and virginity.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 DISCUSSION

Using feminist anthropological theoretical perspectives and methods we embarked upon a collaborative thesis to examine how RFSU constructs their version of sexuality through the introduction of the word *slidkrans*. The feminist anthropological theoretical underpinnings of this project established sexuality as a contextually constructed concept. This perspective facilitated our research and led to our primary research question exploring how a change to the language used to discuss virginity affects the construction of sexuality. Our combined backgrounds and experiences helped us to access our various participants who were involved in the introduction of *slidkrans*.

³⁴³ Ali, Alán. 2010. Interviewed by Rachel Cooper and Lyndsay Nylander. Digital audio recording. Malmö, April 9.

³⁴⁴ Mohanty 2003, 3

For our analysis of the introduction of the word *slidkrans* we found four intersecting themes that were implicit in the process of constructing a new sexuality: language, education, the Other and silence. These themes all interact with each other on multiple levels and at various points of intersection. When analyzed together they help to reveal how RFSU went about introducing this new sexuality and what the organization's motivations were. The introduction of *slidkrans* draws attention to the importance of virginity in the construction of sexuality and the four themes clarify how the change occurred. Using a collaborative feminist approach to anthropology we have presented an analysis of each of these themes. Now we will consider how these four intersecting themes were combined by RFSU to construct a new sexuality.

Language is a central component in the introduction of *slidkrans*. The introduction of this new word is one of the catalysts for constructing a new understanding of sexuality. The linguistic change from *mödomshinna* to *slidkrans* challenges the concept of virginity and demonstrates how virginity is a fundamental feature in the construction of sexuality in Sweden. This change in language also illustrates how language is tool through which sexuality is understood and thus constructed. A change in language alone cannot precipitate a total shift in the understanding of sexuality. That change must be supported by individuals. Our participants all noted the power that the word *slidkrans* held in encouraging a revised understanding of virginity and subsequently sexuality. Along with individual support, the new word has been introduced in more formal arenas, including the publication of the *slidkrans* booklet, RFSU's sex education classes, sex education for newly arrived refugee children and RFSU's presence at girls' fairs. Through each of these arenas young people are taught the value of individualizing sexuality and how to create their own definition of virginity. This redefinition of virginity puts into question concepts of prestige and purity based on one's virginity "status." By encouraging a reconceptualization of sexuality and virginity and removing the need for biological proof of virginity the pressure of not being virgin is made illusory.

The introduction of the word *slidkrans* does not only challenge the language and construction of sexuality and virginity, it also forces a reexamination of the concept of Other in Sweden. The introduction of the word *slidkrans* and its accompanying booklet demonstrate how the public debate about immigrants in Sweden led RFSU to see the commonalities within Sweden rather than stigmatizing the Other; thus the Other's "issues" became society's issues. By individualizing virginity, hymen surgeries can then be regarded as unnecessary. The anatomical authority that the *slidkrans* booklet uses to encourage an individualistic understanding of virginity also silences through language and through translation. Constructions of sexuality can easily exclude when thought of in black and white terms, as when intersex and transgender people are silenced by rigid biological understandings of virginity and sexuality. The introduction of *slidkrans* and the later translations into other languages have shown that RFSU's view that sexuality is not directly tied or policed by the myth of virginity must be presented in a culturally relevant and appropriate way when translating the booklet.

Our four analytical themes all are interconnected through a web of discourses. Since its introduction, the word *slidkrans* has possessed the power to inspire students, sexual educators and others to reconsider what virginity and sexuality mean. It has silenced some voices and simultaneously forced reflection upon what sexuality and virginity mean in a cross-cultural context. The introduction of *slidkrans* has created a climate where new understandings of sexuality and virginity can be considered and practiced.

6.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Sexuality is a multi-faceted fluid concept that continues to evolve. The word *slidkrans* contributes to this evolution by challenging the formerly held understanding of purity and prestige and deconstructing the myth of virginity. With the continued influence of globalization and the increase of shared knowledge across language and cultural lines, deep and continuous reflection on

the discourses of sexuality is needed. This reflection will help negotiate the collisions between different groups' understandings and to encourage greater equality. In this thesis we did not delve into the role of personal narratives, conflict, power and identity, among others themes that could add new dimensions to this reflection. The introduction of *slidkrans* is a good step towards an equality reached through sexuality but the discussion and awareness around different constructions of sexuality must continue for the word to have the greatest impact. We encourage others to further this exploration into the implications of *slidkrans* on different constructions of sexuality and virginity.

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