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'Is this normal?': Examining sex education in a corpus of magazine advice columns

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Abstract

To properly understand sex education, it is important to consider the informal education that takes place outside the classroom. Students often seek out other resources to supplement the education they receive in school, especially to cover topics which are absent or underdeveloped in the formal sex education curriculum. A key resource for this, especially among young women, is the magazine advice column. Advice columns create a direct interaction between the reader and the magazine and encourage the disclosure of intimate, confidential information, making them a ready medium for the production and consumption of sex education. This study uses the advice columns in *Dolly*, a popular Australian magazine, to investigate adolescents' concerns about normality. This research is based on a corpus of 88,000 words, with data from advice columns published 20 years apart (mid-1990s and mid-2010s), which is analyzed using keywords and concordancing. This is a unique corpus study in that it considers similarity as well as difference in the data by investigating the recurring concern with normality that is evident in both decades of the corpus.

Keywords: sex education, magazines, advice columns, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis

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Introduction

Sex education has the potential to challenge the status quo on homophobia and gender inequality, as well as general sexual ignorance (Boynton 2006: 544). The potential positive outcomes when sex education is done well, and negative outcomes when it is done poorly, mean that it has received attention from researchers in education as well as healthcare, sociology, psychology, gender and cultural studies, and linguistics. This research[1] has primarily focused on sex education in schools, frequently reporting on the failure of much school sex education (for detailed Australian summaries see Mitchell et al. 2014; Hillier et al. 2010). Given the failings of traditional school sex education, it is unsurprising that young people turn to other sources for their information on sex and relationships. Accordingly, while research on sex education has mainly focused on classrooms, it has increasingly looked at other mediums (Nelson and Martin 2004). Chief among these are magazines, which have played an important role in the transmission of sexual knowledge since the early twentieth century (see Ehrenreich and English 1978, Kent 1979). They were much more accessible than other media, especially for working-class people, and quickly became a vehicle for mass sex education (Bashford and Strange 2004: 74). Magazines are particularly significant for teenage girls; they are a preferred source of information and guidance about sex, and some girls consider them to be as important a source as parents (Arthurs and Zacharias 2006; Medley-Rath 2007, cited in Clarke 2009). Young women actively seek out sex education in magazines to supplement the formal curriculum, particularly to cover topics which are absent or underdeveloped such as masturbation, homosexuality, and sexual abuse (Kehily 1999a, b; Bragg 2006; Hillier et al. 2010). This is especially true of advice columns. Advice columns create a direct

interaction between the reader and the magazine. They encourage the disclosure of intimate, confidential information and evoke a kind of female solidarity, since both readers and authors of advice columns tend to be women (Neville 2012). This makes advice columns a useful site for studying the production and consumption of sex education (Bashford and Strange 2004: 84).

This paper explores this aspect of sex education in detail by examining *Dolly*, a popular magazine aimed at young Australian women. Using corpus-assisted discourse analysis (see also Mockler, this issue), it shows how the adjective 'normal' has remained frequent in advice columns for the last 20 years, revealing an ongoing preoccupation with normality. Examining the use of this term in context shows that this constructs a 'discourse of normality',[2] which is used in ways that validate and give meaning to a range of adolescent experiences. This study is situated within both corpus linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Corpus linguistics has been used to study discourses in numerous studies and in diverse types of corpora, including newspapers, presidential speeches, film and television scripts, and online health forums, to name just a few (see e.g., Baker and McEnery 2015, Baker 2006). This dual approach of corpus and CDA has proven to be a productive "cross-pollination" (Baker et al. 2008: 297) for revealing how ideologies are manifested in language and in larger bodies of text, and will thus be a valuable approach for this study.

Discourses in young women's magazines

Sex education is just as much evaluative as it is informative, and this is especially true for sex education in popular media (see Fine 1998; Kehily 1999a, b). Media, including magazines, influence what is considered acceptable or normative sexual practice, with judgments ranging from conservative to shaming (Farvid and Braun 2014: 118; Attwood et al. 2015: 529). These messages are influential on their young audience; while magazines appeal to readers because they are not the traditional authority, their attitudes regarding sexuality and relationships can be just as compelling and hard to challenge as those present in the classroom (Bragg 2006: 549). Additionally, these discourses may have real-world effects on sexual health practices such as condom use (Burns 2018).

Dominant[3] discourses in magazines for young women are briefly outlined below (see Carr and Bednarek 2019 for a more detailed summary). The first dominant discourse is that of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1980: 632), where heterosexuality is assumed and other sexualities are either marginalized or simply left out (Jackson 2005: 310, Kehily 1999b: 84). Heterosexuality is considered the norm, especially in terms of what constitutes 'real' or 'proper' sex. For example, a strong focus on pregnancy assumes that sex is synonymous with penis-in-vagina intercourse (Attwood et al. 2015: 530). Related to the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality are discourses which treat male and female sexuality as radically different, reproducing the same 'sexual double standard' that was identified more than half a century ago (Reiss 1960). Women are expected to not enjoy sex and to remain chaste, while men are expected to have a strong and even uncontrollable desire for sex (Bachechi and Hall 2015, Clarke 2009). These discourses have also been studied

diachronically (e.g., Attwood et al. 2015, Bachechi and Hall 2015), with research identifying some moves towards more progressive messages (e.g., increasing acceptance of same-sex attraction), but ultimately concluding that any changes did not represent a significant shift in content (Carpenter 1998).

Since the present study is concerned with normality, it is worth mentioning here those studies which reference normality in adolescent magazines and advice columns. Harvey et al. (2007) show that normality is a key concern for adolescents in their corpus of questions submitted to online adolescent health forum. They show that it is used in relation to a range of issues, including mood, sex and age-related norms (2007: 775). Similarly, Kang et al. (2009) find that adolescents seek "reassurance of normalcy" in relation to a range of issues (2009: 197). Notably, their study also examines *Dolly* advice columns, though they conduct a content analysis rather than a detailed linguistic analysis, and only examine questions and not the corresponding answers.

The importance of normality for adolescents has also been highlighted in discourse analytic research. Harvey (2012) and Carr and Bednarek (2019) identify a normalizing discourse of mental health in adolescent advice texts. The normalizing discourse of mental health treats emotional turmoil as an ordinary, everyday part of the human experience, contrasting with a medicalizing discourse where distress is described in clinical terms (e.g., *feeling depressed* vs. *having depression*). Mullany et al. (2015) highlight the importance of normality in relation to weight and eating in adolescent advice questions (note this is the same corpus as Harvey (2012) and Harvey et al. (2007)). They describe a discourse of normality in relation to the body, alongside a discourse of slenderness. To my knowledge, this is the only reference to a 'discourse of normality' in the literature. However, whereas Mullany et al. (2015)

discuss this discourse exclusively in relation to the body, the present study examines this discourse in relation to a range of issues. In addition, this paper looks closely at how this discourse is constructed linguistically, moving beyond simply identifying which discourse is present to also describe the resources that construct it. Further, it will investigate the discourse of normality over time, considering similarities between data from two time periods set twenty years apart (for an examination of *differences* between these time periods see Carr and Bednarek (2019)).

Data and Methodology

The data in this study are the advice pages of *Dolly*, a beauty, lifestyle and celebrity magazine aimed at Australian girls aged 14-17 (Dolly 2017). The advice pages in this corpus are from two decades: 1994 and 1995 (1990s) and 2014 and 2015 (2010s).[4] These advice columns, known as 'Dolly Doctor', contain questions submitted by readers which are answered by a medical professional, celebrity, or journalist. While the published questions only represent a specific subset of all letters sent to the magazine, the questions are genuine and unedited except for typographical errors and occasionally length (personal communication Kang 2017). The corpus contains a total of 538 questions and answers (1076 texts) and 88 476 words. Table 1 provides a summary of the number of texts and the word count for each year in the Diachronic Dolly Doctor (DDD) corpus.

	Sub-corpus 1		**Sub-corpus 2**		
Year	**1994**	**1995**	**2014**	**2015**	**All**
Number of texts	316	336	232	192	1076
Word count: questions	7 089	6645	6281	6105	26 120
Word count: answers	16 160	15 276	16 918	14 102	62 356
Total	23 149	21 921	23 199	20 207	88 476

Table 1 Word count for the corpus by year

Further details of the corpus design and building are described in Carr (2017). The corpus was analyzed with the help of WordSmith Tools (Scott 2017a).

My starting point is keyword analysis (Scott and Tribble 2006). Keyword analysis identifies words which are unusually frequent in one corpus (study corpus) compared to a second corpus (reference corpus), and so is useful for comparing data sets (Scott 2017b). The reference corpus used in this study is the Australian Corpus of English (ACE, Peters 1986), which contains 757 024 words from 500 samples of published (written) fiction and non-fiction texts (Australian Corpus of English 2017). This is a suitable reference corpus for the present study as it represents general, written Australian English, and because it is large enough for comparison with the DDD corpus. To begin, I give an overview of the major themes in the DDD corpus by comparing it as a whole to the ACE. This allows me to identify the linguistic features and common themes of *Dolly* advice columns, providing an initial characterization of the corpus. I then compare each *sub*-corpus of the DDD corpus to the ACE and identify matching keywords in each decade in order to pinpoint similarities between

the two decades. Many corpus studies focus on difference, effectively creating a 'blind spot' where an analyst can only ever hope to achieve a 180-degree view of their data (Taylor 2013: 83). This paper focuses instead on similarity by identifying keywords that have remained stable over time, what Baker (2011: 66) refers to as 'lockwords'; words that may change in meaning or context of usage but which remain static in frequency across diachronic corpora. This analysis for similarity highlights that the term *normal* recurs across the decades, and I therefore examine this word in context (concordance lines as well as the full text) in order to more fully describe the discourse of normality. (Note that a '360-degree' view of the DDD corpus, i.e., analyzing similarity *and* difference, can be achieved by reading this paper in combination with Carr and Bednarek (2019))

Keywords are then investigated in context using concordancing. Concordance analysis is used to search for a selected word (or phrase) and presents every instance of that word with the context (i.e., co-text) that it occurs in, usually several words to the left and right. Instances of the search word or 'node word' are presented in the center of the screen stacked on top of each other (Baker 2006: 71; Hunston 2002: 39). In the case of *normal*, wider co-text is explored by also investigating a word in its full context i.e., by returning to the full question-and-answer text.

Findings and Discussion

Overview of the corpus

A keyword list can provide an initial characterization of a particular domain or text type (Adolphs 2006: 46), and so is a useful starting point to give an overview of the linguistic features and major themes of a corpus. Table 2 lists the frequency, normalized frequency (per 100,000 words), number of texts, percentage of texts and log-likelihood of the 20 most 'key' words in the DDD corpus compared to the Australian Corpus of English (for the full keyword list see Carr 2017, Appendix 3):[5]

Rank	Keyword	Freq.	N. Freq.	Texts	% Texts	LL
1	your	1546	1747.3	484	45.0	4560.1
2	you	2283	2580.3	560	52.0	4385.7
3	I'm	506	571.9	351	32.6	1422.4
4	I	1689	1909.0	575	53.4	1258.9
5	my	845	955.1	439	40.8	1125.8
6	it's	537	606.9	360	33.5	1115.4
7	can	795	898.5	486	45.2	1062.6
8	you're	339	383.2	227	21.1	1043.0
9	if	784	886.1	450	41.8	987.9
10	feel	347	392.2	264	24.5	916.6
11	sex	270	305.2	165	15.3	853.0
12	don't	410	463.4	323	30.0	827.0

13	boyfriend	189	213.6	162	15.1	782.8
14	really	327	369.6	266	24.7	720.7
15	guy	169	191.0	133	12.4	648.3
16	talk	226	255.4	173	16.1	645.3
17	skin	184	208.0	90	8.4	585.5
18	help	270	305.2	220	20.4	573.0
19	friend	213	240.7	153	14.2	547.2
20	friends	210	237.3	160	14.9	513.9

Table 2 Top 20 keywords in the DDD corpus compared to the ACE, sorted by log-likelihood

Table 2 shows that the DDD corpus contains many first and second person pronouns: *your, you, I'm, I, my* and *you're* all appear in the ten most key words. This reflects the self-oriented, interpersonal nature of the advice column genre (Harvey 2013: 23, 97). Third person pronouns are present but less key (not in the top 20) and tend to be male, with *him* and *he's* being more key than *she's*. This indicates that the questions are most likely to be about the author (*I, my*), and then about a male friend or partner (*him, he's*). This is also reflected in the presence of *boyfriend* and *guy* among the keywords in Table 2. Since these questions tend to be about romantic and sexual relationships, this finding suggests that heterosexuality is the default sexual orientation, as is typical of popular magazines (Fine 1998, see also Rich 1980); most questioners are females inquiring about relationships with males. While the DDD corpus is made up of written texts, it contains some features of spoken language, such as first and second person pronouns and contractions such as *I'm* and *it's*.

A comprehensive analysis of topics in the DDD corpus is demonstrated in Table 3. Table 3 lists the lexical words among the 100 most key words to illustrate the thematic focus of the corpus. These keywords can be divided into sexual health; people and relationships; bodies; puberty and development; emotions; and healthcare:[6]

Category	**Keywords (raw frequency)**
Sexual health	sex (270), vagina (108), sexual (110), pill (49), vaginal (38), infection (49), condom (38), pregnant (50), sexually (43), penis (31), pregnancy (48), intercourse (37)
People and relationships	boyfriend (189), guy (169), friend (213), friends (210), mum (140), relationship (124), guys (87), girls (123), parents (95)
Bodies	skin (184), vagina (108), breasts (89), hair (145), body (166), breast (55), weight (85), penis (31)
Puberty and development	breasts (89), puberty (77), periods (93), breast (55) period (125)
Emotions	feel (347), feelings (113), feeling (100), worried (62), scared (44), uncomfortable (33)
Healthcare	doctor (177), counsellor (67), pain (68), infection (49), symptoms (47), GP (38), clinic (40)

Table 3 Categorization of 100 most key lexical words in the DDD corpus, in order of log-likelihood

Table 3 shows that the corpus consists of content relating to sexuality and relationships as well as puberty and healthcare. Thus, sex education in *Dolly* consists

of more than information about sexual practices and sexual identities; it extends to non-romantic relationships (e.g., *friends*, *mum*), as well as to issues of body image and development. This is consistent with a broad definition of 'sex education' which includes learning about relationships, health and wellbeing, and personal safety in addition to the human body and sexual and reproductive health (UNESCO 2018). The topics identified in Table 3 are in considerable overlap with the topics that Kang and her colleagues (Kang 1999, 2000; Kang et al. 2009) identify in their content analyses of Dolly Doctor questions. Notably, these studies analyzed the questions *submitted* to *Dolly*. While only a fraction of these are ever published by the magazine, these are evidently an accurate representation of the topics in *all* submitted questions. This suggests that the results of this study may apply not only to adolescent anxieties as they are represented in the media, but also to young people's concerns more broadly. Having provided an overview of the corpus as whole, below I compare the sub-corpora (i.e., the two decades) of the DDD corpus.

Similarities between the decades

As mentioned above, keyword analysis is typically used to highlight differences between two corpora by identifying words which are unusually frequent in a corpus relative to a reference corpus. However, the same corpus technique can be used to identify the *similarities* between two corpora by comparing them to the same reference corpus, a method outlined by Taylor (2013). The sub-corpora were thus compared individually to the ACE and the two resulting keyword lists were then compared to identify matching keywords in each decade, with a focus on evaluative

language. Evaluative language is language which expresses an attitude towards a person, situation or other entity (Hunston 2011: 1). This is a useful point of departure for a paper concerned with discourses, since this offers direct insight into the ideologies in a text. This study will focus on evaluative lexis, or evaluative meaning expressed through lexical items (e.g. *success, unfortunately*). Note however that most theories of evaluative language recognise that evaluation can be indicated by a range of lexical and other items (ibid.: 13).

Evaluative terms that are keywords in both decades are: *want, normal, like, infection, best, scared, pain, trusted, uncomfortable, important, worried, comfortable, healthy, painful, hurt, bad, trust, difficult* and *wrong* (for full keyword lists see Carr 2017, Appendix 5). After examining these terms in usage, we can categorize them according to the themes identified in Table 3, though only three of these categories are relevant: people and relationships, emotions, and healthcare. The remaining terms are classed as general evaluation, as shown in Table 4:

Category	**Keywords**
People and relationships	*trusted, trust*[7]
Emotions	*scared, uncomfortable, worried, comfortable, hurt*
Healthcare	*infection, pain, painful, healthy*
General evaluation	*want, normal, like, best, important, bad, difficult, wrong*

Table 4 Categorization of evaluative keywords that occur in both sub-corpora of the DDD corpus

Rather than examining all of these terms in detail, I will consider just the three most key: *want, normal* and *like*. The frequency, number of texts, percentage of texts and log-likelihood of these words in each decade are listed in Table 5:

	Freq.		**Texts**		**% Texts**		**LL**	
	1990	2010	1990	2010	1990	2010	1990	2010
want	144	126	115	98	17.6	23.1	315.1	260.1
normal	63	68	58	58	8.9	13.7	189.9	216.1
like	202	243	160	169	24.5	39.9	171.2	275.0

Table 5 Details of *want, normal* and *like* for the 1990s and 2010s in the DDD corpus, using the ACE as a reference corpus

Of these three key evaluative terms, *normal* is worth investigating over *want* and *like*. Firstly, *like* is used as a comparative (e.g., *your symptoms sound **like** vaginal thrush*) rather than as an evaluation (e.g., *I really **like** this guy*) in over half of all occurrences (275 out of 445 tokens). Thus while *like* can be an evaluation, this is not its typical use in the corpus. Secondly, *want* is the most key evaluation, but this may be because it is a common word in spoken English (Leech, Rayson & Wilson 2001: 144). Keyword analysis identifies words which are unusually frequent compared to some reference corpus. Since the DDD contains features of spoken language (see above), comparing it with the ACE (written texts) will highlight differences in spoken and written language, and *want* is likely one such example. *Normal* is thus preferable to *like* and *want* as a point of further inquiry as it is a key evaluation, and because it is an evaluation unique to this corpus rather than a feature of spoken English.

Before examining how *normal* is used in the corpus, it is worth clarifying two things: (1) is *normal* actually evaluative lexis?, and (2) what is meant by the 'discourse of normality'? Regarding the first query, while this paper does not make use of any particular theory of evaluative language, 'normal' would fit within several of these frameworks. It would be a broadly positive attitude within Biber and Finegan's (1988, 1989) 'attitudinal stance', or within Bednarek's (2006) 'emotivity'. Other theories of evaluation categorize 'normal' as a sub-type of evaluation: within Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal, normality ('how unusual someone is') is part of judgment, the system concerned with evaluations of people and behaviors (2005: 52). Within Lemke's (1998) attitudinal meaning, 'normal' is part of the dimension of usuality/expectability e.g., *It is* ***normal*** *that John is coming* (1998: 37). Without specifying a particular framework, my approach treats *normal* as evaluative, specifically a positive evaluation.

Regarding the definition of the 'discourse of normality', we can examine how *normal* is used in the corpus. *Normal* may be used to describe what is medically typical or atypical, as in *Montgomery Tubercles [are] a* ***normal*** *part of your breast tissue*, or what is statistically average, as in *most people masturbate at least once in their lives - it is a* ***normal*** *form of sexual behaviour*. But beyond this, *normal* also functions to designate that someone fits within a normative structure, as in *it is a* ***normal*** *part of development to have generalised feelings of attraction - for males AND females*. Here the concern is not about what is healthy or requires medical attention, but about fitting in with one's peers. And while *normal* may also make reference to what is statistically ordinary, as in *normal skin* ***like everyone else***, this is part of a broader goal of seeking and offering reassurance and "giv[ing] meaning to the experience of being adolescent" (Currie 1999: 208). A discourse of normality,

then, constructs something or someone's feelings and behaviors as being ordinary and/or statistically average, but also as fitting into the normative structure. This is perhaps best understood in contrast to alternative discourses, such as a discourse of healthiness. A discourse of healthiness treats something as medically non-threatening and even helpful, such as *masturbation is a healthy form of sexual expression*. In contrast, a discourse of normality treats something as the opposite of deviant; it is ordinary, common and usual, as in *masturbating, fantasising and experimenting are* ***normal*** (2015_8_A5).

Having established that *normal* is key in both decades (although it occurs more frequently and in more texts in the 2010s), the following section will discuss its usage across the entire corpus, rather than diachronically. I return to consider *normal* in each decade at the end of this paper, also discussing the difference in frequency and distribution.

Normal in the DDD corpus

Examining *normal* in context indicates that is indeed used evaluatively in the corpus, and this is particularly evident in the questions. A concordance analysis of *normal* indicates that it is most commonly used in the questions as a 'tag' evaluation at the end of the text, for example, *is this normal?* (Similar to a tag question – an interrogative fragment that comes after a clause to indicate that a response is required e.g., *right?, isn't it?* (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 109)). Out of 34 concordance lines, 15 show *normal* being used as a tag evaluation, where the questioner describes the situation and follows with *is this normal?* or *is it normal?* Ten of these appear at

the end of the question, and five are followed by an additional request for help e.g., *is this normal? Is there anything I can do?* This is shown in Figure 1:

, because we didn't use a condom. Is it normal?
fill it out. What does this mean? Is it normal?
I'm really confused. Please help - is it normal for friends to kiss?
in my undies. What is it? Is it normal?
, especially around my nipples. Is this normal? Please help me because I just
a while. Is something wrong, or is this normal?
embarrassing being so small. Is this normal?
between my vagina and anus. Is this normal?
right breast's bigger than my left. Is this normal?
the chair is wet, like sweaty. Is this normal? It's embarrassing!
I've got an inny nipple, is this normal?
people will think I'm a 'baby'. Is this normal for other girls my age and is
about every couple of days. Is this normal? Do I need to wear a panty
flat chested. I'm so confused - is this normal? Is there anything I can do to
I've had no breast development. Is this normal? I feel really self-conscious and

Figure 1 Concordance lines of *normal* in the DDD corpus questions, sorted by the word one place to the left (L1)

In these examples, the questioner first presents their problem. This may contain evaluation which explicitly indicates the questioner's negative assessment of the situation, as in:

(1) I'm 15 years old and I have very small breasts. I have had my periods and I find it **really embarrassing** being so small. **Is this normal?** (1995_8_Q2)[8]

Alternatively, it may contain no explicit evaluation, but will still be understood negatively since the questioner is by definition seeking a solution to a problem (see also Carr 2017: 21-2 on the advice column genre):

(2) I have some short, wispy hairs between my vagina and anus. **Is this normal**? (1995_9_Q9)

In this way, normality is formulated in contrast to some problem, regardless of whether the issue is explicitly negatively evaluated or not. This indicates that the concept of normality is not a neutral expression, but is loaded with positive evaluation. Additionally, *normal* is almost never negated in the DDD corpus: there are three instances of *not normal* and 6 instances of *abnormal*. However, these are themselves negated, as in *there's* ***nothing abnormal*** *about this* (1994_4_A9) and *this* ***doesn't*** *mean you're* ***not normal*** (1995_8_A2). *Normal* is thus overwhelmingly used as a positive evaluation.

This positive evaluation is often intensified. This can be done through punctuation - specifically exclamation and capitalization:

(3) Don't panic - this is **normal** for developing breasts! (2014_6_A6)

(4) Reality check - your vagina IS **normal**! (2014_5_A9)

A high frequency of intensifiers in the co-text of *normal* (especially in the answers) is in line with this pattern of intensification. Concordance analysis reveals that 28 out of 97 concordance lines for *normal* in the answers are pre-modified by an adverb:

It means that you're	*completely*	normal .	Sexuality is as natural as
Yes it's	*completely*	normal .	You're noticing the
Your discharge is probably	*perfectly*	normal	and isn't a sign of poor
18 . However , it's also	*perfectly*	normal	for women's breasts to
of hair on your body is	*probably*	normal	but see a doctor if you're
the dark patches are quite	*probably*	normal .	Some medical conditions
It is	*quite*	normal	to have hairs growing
your periods are probably	*quite*	normal ,	it would be a good idea
. I'm sure your nipples are	*quite*	normal	for a 13-year-old , but if
about using tampons are	*quite*	normal .	Tampons and pads serve
part and don't forget that it's	*quite*	normal	for girls' hips and thighs to
for your boyfriend , this is	*quite*	normal .	Your choices are to end
what you're experiencing is	*totally*	normal .	Boobs come in all kinds
pregnancy . I'm sure you are	*very*	normal .	Try to remember that you
thoughts and feelings is a	*very*	normal	part of going through

Figure 2 15 randomly selected[9] concordance lines of pre-modified *normal* in the DDD corpus answers, sorted by L1

Figure 2 shows that *normal* is frequently pre-modified by an adverb, and that this intensifies the evaluation, as in *quite normal, completely normal, perfectly normal* and *very normal*. Thus the evaluation *normal* is intended positively, and this evaluation is often modified through intensifiers, with different degrees of intensification.

A key feature of the discourse of normality is that it is used in relation to a range of phenomena and behaviors. This can be seen by examining *normal* in its wider context, specifically the targets that it evaluates, the syntactic constructions it appears in, and its use in creating cohesion across stretches of the text. First, *normal* is used to evaluate a wide range of content, that is, the target of the evaluation is diverse. Some examples are given below, with the target in bold:

(5) All I want is to have normal **skin** like everyone else. (1994_1_Q3)

(6) What you are describing are **Montgomery Tubercles** - a normal part of your breast tissue. (2014_6_A10)

(7) How can I get back to a normal [menstrual] **cycle**? (1994_3_Q6)

(8) Most people **masturbate** at least once in their lives - it is a normal form of sexual behaviour. (1994_4_A11)

(9) During the teen years it is a normal part of development to have **generalised feelings of attraction - for males AND females**. (2014_10_A2)

(10) It's completely OK to **lose feelings for your boyfriend**, this is quite normal.

(11) **Feeling emotional and having mood swings** is also normal. (1995_3_A3)

Here we see *normal* being used to evaluate a range of behavior and phenomena: *skin*, parts of the *breast tissue*, the menstrual *cycle*, masturbation, bisexuality, changing *feelings* in a relationship, and *mood swings*. This demonstrates that the discourse of normality is developed over the full range of topics in the DDD corpus (see Table 3): bodies, puberty and development, sexuality and sexual behavior, people and relationships, and mental health. If *normal* exclusively evaluated targets relating to, say, sexual orientation, there would be an argument for classifying it as part of another discourse, such as the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality. Instead, *normal* is not confined to one topic, but is used to evaluate a variety of behaviors and phenomena (see also Harvey et al. (2007), Kang et al. (2009)). Consequently, I argue that *normal* forms its own discourse: a discourse of normality.

As well as evaluating a variety of targets, *normal* is used in syntactic constructions which maximize the phenomena it can evaluate. As an adjective, *normal* can appear in a range of syntactic constructions. It can pre-modify a noun, as in:

(12) A **normal** 28-day cycle period (2015_5_Q8)

(13) A **normal** form of sexual behaviour (1994_4_A11)

However, concordance analysis shows that *normal* rarely pre-modifies a noun in the DDD corpus. It is much more likely to appear as a complement of *to be*, with a Noun Phrase functioning as subject:

(14) Are my breasts **normal**? (2015_11_Q7)

(15) The amount of hair on your body is probably **normal** (1995_4_A10)

It especially occurs with the dummy subject pronoun *it* followed by *to* + clause, a construction that allows *normal* to evaluate more than a single noun phrase. This can be used to evaluate clauses describing behavior, as in:

(16) Is it **normal** for me to want to be having sex? (2015_8_Q5)

(17) It's **normal** to be sad when a relationship ends (2014_4_A2)

It can also be used to refer back to longer stretches of text through a 'tag' evaluation, as in:

(18) I have some short, wispy hairs between my vagina and anus. Is this **normal**? (1995_9_Q9)

In these constructions, *it* and *this* are often a form of text reference (reference which refers back to what has been said previously, Martin and Rose 2003: 155). Text reference allows the writer to refer back to an entire prior chunk of text, such that normality can encapsulate longer, more descriptive phenomena, as in:

(19) My left breast is smaller than my right. They have been growing and recently my nipples are enlarged, but my left one is still smaller. It fills out three-quarters of my bra but my right one does fill it out. What does this mean? Is it **normal**? (2014_6_Q6)

Importantly, this is different to the constructions we see in general Australian English. Concordance lines for *normal* in the Australian Corpus of English indicate that it is most commonly used to pre-modify a noun, as shown in Figure 3:

week studying the course over a	normal	*college* year . A further two
to have been considered to be a	normal	*feature* of the life of many
allocation of research grants . It is	normal	*for* academics to be judged
of 359,000 litres a year , without	normal	*garden* watering in summer .
of my tasks is to try to establish	normal	*haematological* and biological
, Macassarese would have been the	normal	*means* of communication .
detained at Silverwater Prison . "It is	normal	*procedure* to offer prisoners
problems these components cause in	normal	*processing* . Skirting on
abolished and the amount paid as	normal	*salary* . One might think such
the die . They termed this occurrence	normal	*segregation* . 2.2 As fines
extremely well done . The film ran at	normal	*speed* right to the moment
filming of situation comedies - so	normal	*they* become surreal . It is
. Next we show that where n is the	normal	*to* is continuous in the
the bedding planes strike roughly	normal	*to* the bench face .
interest in a subject outside their	normal	*vocation* . The courses vary

Figure 3 15/68 randomly selected concordance lines of *normal* in the Australian Corpus of English, sorted by R1

In such constructions, *normal* evaluates a specific item within a noun-phrase (e.g., *normal feature* or *normal salary*). This is the most common construction with *normal* in the ACE, and while it does occur in the DDD corpus, as in Examples 12 and 13 above, it is much less common. The preferred construction is one which refers to longer stretches of text referring to situations or behaviors, allowing the evaluation *normal* to apply to a wider range of phenomena.

This same effect can also be achieved by using *normal* in the hyperTheme. A Theme is a "peak of prominence" at the beginning of a clause (Martin and Rose 2003: 177). A hyperTheme is a higher level Theme which functions as a 'topic sentence' for a phase of discourse (ibid.: 181). An example of a hyperTheme is underlined in Example 20:

(20) Starting to have sexual thoughts and feelings is a **very normal** part of going through puberty and becoming an adult. The same hormones telling your body to develop breasts and start having periods can also make you become curious about sex and to sometimes feel sexually aroused. Masturbating, fantasising and experimenting are **normal** and shouldn't cause you to feel any guilt… (2015_8_A5)

In Example 20, the inclusion of *normal* in the hyperTheme gives the evaluation a larger scope, allowing it to extend beyond the sentence and over a longer phase of discourse. We understand from the higher level hyperTheme that the earlier evaluation *very normal* still applies to *becom[ing] curious about sex*. This is also true for the third sentence, but the evaluation is re-emphasized when it is repeated in

masturbating, fantasising and experimenting are ***normal***. The inclusion of *normal* in the hyperTheme thus expands the target of this evaluation to cover longer stretches of text. In sum, the discourse of normality applies to a whole range of experiences, as seen through the diverse ways in which the adjective is used in the corpus (e.g., with a range of targets, for textual cohesion). Normality is clearly not defined in one particularly way, rather, "'normal' can means lots of different things" (2014_11_A3).

The effect of this explicit, wide-ranging evaluation is significant. Currie (2001) found that, when reading advice columns, girls "reject self-constructions in favour of those offered by the text" (2001: 277). That is, if a girl's experience is different to what is presented by a magazine, she will reject her own experience rather than the magazine's point of view. The discourse of normality counteracts this in three ways. Firstly, the discourse of normality is explicit in its evaluation. While discourses generally (re)produce social meanings, they likely do so implicitly. For example, the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality might minimize or dismiss non-heterosexual attraction through omission, rather than through explicit evaluation (Baker 2006: 5). In contrast, a discourse of normality explicitly invokes norms; it directly evaluates certain behaviours and phenomena as normal or acceptable. Secondly, this evaluation is overwhelmingly positive (recall that there are almost no instances of *normal* being negated, including *abnormal*), including intensified evaluations such as *completely normal* and *very normal*. Finally, this discourse explicitly evaluates a *range* of experiences, rather than one in particular, as *normal*. In these ways, the discourse of normality validates a diverse range of experiences. And where this differs from the reader's self-construction, the magazine's reassurance – about different bodies, different emotions, different sexualities and sexual behaviours – will be accorded truth value over and above the reader's own experience.

Pre-publication draft of: **Carr, G.** (2020). 'Is this normal?': Examining sex education in a corpus of magazine advice columns. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, *43*(2), 145-168. https://doi.org/10.1075/aral.00030.car

Re-examining the distribution of normal

Thus far I have considered the use of *normal* as it appears across questions and answers, and as it occurs throughout the entirety of the DDD corpus. Teasing apart these sub-corpora, however, reveals important findings about the distribution of *normal*. *Normal* appears in both the questions and answers, but its distribution in each is not equal. *Normal* occurs almost three times as often in the answers (frequency = 34 for questions, 97 for answers). This is largely accounted for by the size of the answer sub-corpus compared to the question sub-corpus, which is approximately 3:1 (see Table 1). However, as well as occurring more frequently, *normal* appears in many more answers than questions (i.e., number of texts). This is represented in Figure 4:

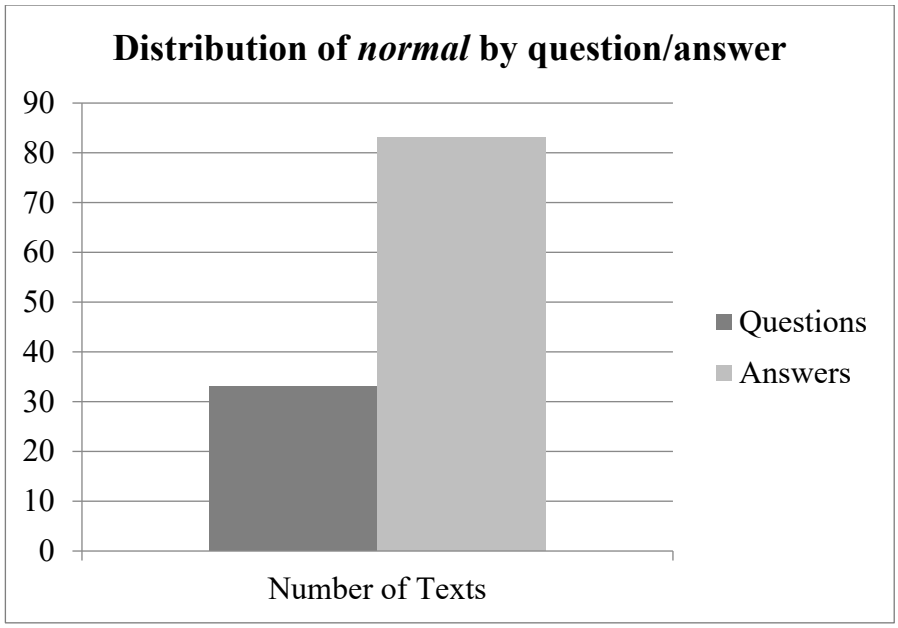

Figure 4 Distribution of *normal* in the DDD corpus by question/answer

Figure 4 shows that there is an asymmetry in the distribution of *normal* across the questions and answers of the DDD corpus. This indicates that there are a large number of answers containing *normal* when this evaluation was not introduced in the question. This is indeed the case: out of 98 question-and-answer pairs where at least one contains *normal*, 65 only contain *normal* in the answer.

We can further examine this distribution of *normal* by decade, revealing a difference between these sub-corpora which is disguised when they are compared as a whole to the reference corpus. The distribution by question/answer and by decade is represented in Figure 5:[10]

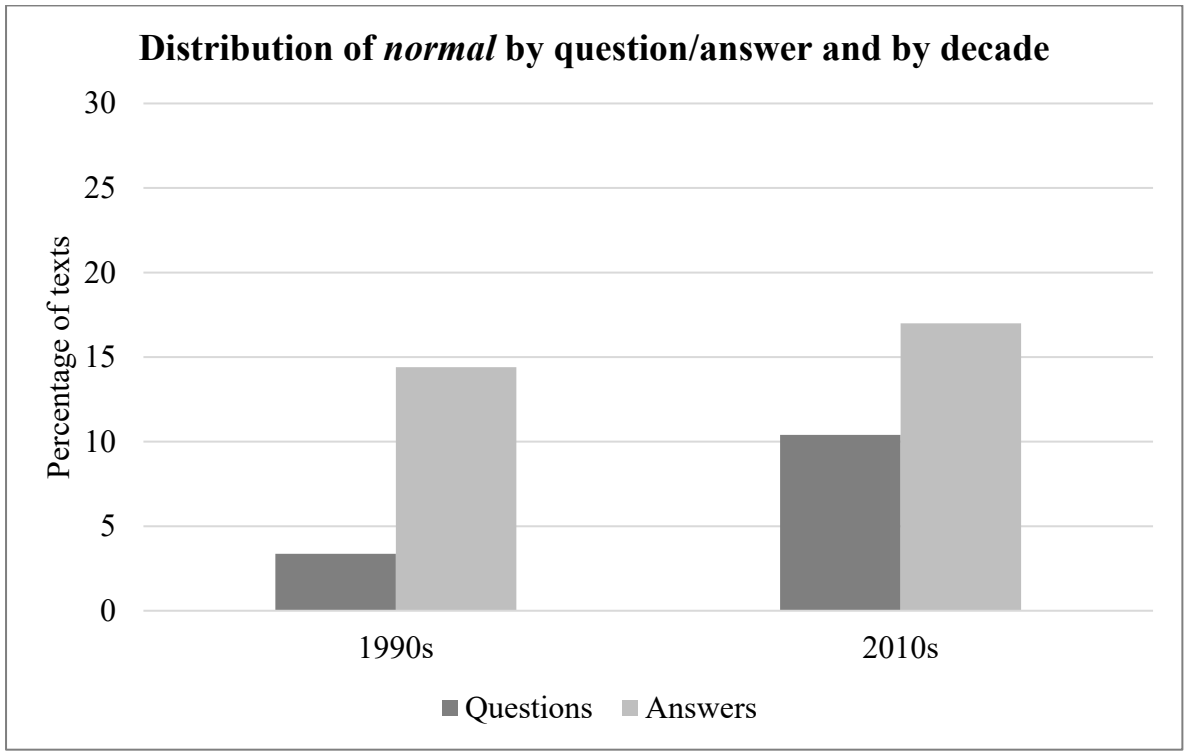

Figure 5 Distribution of *normal* by question/answer and by decade

Figure 5 shows two key findings. Firstly, that the percentage of texts containing *normal* has increased from the 1990s to the 2010s. This suggests that the discourse of

normality is growing, though a midpoint in the data (i.e., the 2000s) would be necessary to confirm if this is the case. Secondly, and more significantly, we see a sharp increase in the percentage of questions containing *normal* in the 2010s compared to the 1990s. There are almost 4 times as many answers than questions containing *normal* in the 1990s, but only 1.6 times as many in the 2010s. This finding suggests that the answers were more responsible for constructing the discourse of normality in the 1990s, and over time this has been taken up by the questions. This may be regarded as evidence that the language of the magazine is adopted by the readers, and speaks to the impact that media can have on not just our reception, but also our reproduction, of certain discourses. Of course, the readers of *Dolly* magazine in 1994 and 1995 are not the same as those in 2014 and 2015, and I cannot comment on the direct influence that the magazine has upon its readers in promoting the discourse of normality. Understanding these direct effects would require a study comparing a much smaller time period, such as five consecutive years of the magazine. While the present study can only hypothesize about how this discourse has been taken up in the past two decades, the increase in the proportion of questioners producing the discourse of normality does suggest an uptake of the discourse by the readers over time. Importantly, the *usage* of *normal* across the two decades has not shifted dramatically; for example it is primarily used as tag evaluation in questions, is frequently intensified with adverbs in the answer, and is used to evaluate a range of phenomena across questions and answers. The discourse has not changed in terms of its frequency, its content, or in terms of how it is constructed, but it has changed in terms of its distribution.

Pre-publication draft of: **Carr, G.** (2020). 'Is this normal?': Examining sex education in a corpus of magazine advice columns. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, *43*(2), 145-168. https://doi.org/10.1075/aral.00030.car

Implications and Conclusion

While other studies on magazines have highlighted that normality is a key concern of adolescents, the present study has consolidated this into the 'discourse of normality'. This extends Mullany et al.'s (2015) work, the only existing reference to a discourse of normality, beyond a discourse about the body to a discourse which evaluates a range of phenomena which *includes* bodies, but which also includes puberty and development, sexuality and sexual behavior, people and relationships, and mental health. Further, this paper has described the construction of this discourse, and in the process shown how the adjective 'normal' is used to evaluate a variety of behaviors and phenomena, and thus to validate a range of experiences of adolescence. This gives us greater insight into the variety of sex education discourses and provides a useful point of comparison for future research in different magazines, different time periods, or different mediums of sex education. In addition, this finding suggests that sex education discourses are changing and becoming more progressive; existing sex education discourses often treat sex and sexuality as problematic, for example, the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality treats non-mainstream sexualities as deviant. In contrast, the discourse of normality treats a range of experiences of adolescence, including diverse sexualities, as ordinary and usual, demonstrating a move towards more progressive discourses in sex education.

Finally, this paper has presented evidence that the readers (the questions) have adopted this discourse from the magazine (the answers) over time. This hints at the impact that media can have not just on our reception, but also our reproduction, of certain discourses. The uptake of evaluative material has been a point of interest of many researchers and is consistently identified as a future direction for work on sex

education discourses (e.g., Clarke 2009, Reviere and Byerly 2013, Farvid and Braun 2014). McRobbie writes, "Until we have a much clearer idea of how girls read [magazines] and encounter [their] ideological force, our analysis remains one-sided" (1991: 131-2). By examining the changing distribution of discourses over time, this study has taken a first step towards investigating both sides of sex education discourses: how they are produced and how they are received.

The findings of this study are significant for what they reveal about the messages that adolescents are exposed to in the media, as well as how these discourses might be taken up by young women. But these findings are also significant for people that work in other types of sex education, including the traditional classroom setting; school educators need to be familiar with the other sources that students seek out to complement their formal education, and be aware of the messages that young people encounter in those sources. This study is thus relevant to those working in media, in education, in health, and for anyone concerned with how young people are taught to view their bodies, their sexuality, and their place in the world.

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[1] Unless otherwise specified, research is synthesized from Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the Unites States; countries whose sex education is historically and culturally comparable (Nelson and Martin 2004: 4).

[2] I use the term 'discourse' in the Foucauldian sense, as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972: 49), which (re)produce social and cultural meanings through texts (Harvey 2013: 48).

[3] 'Dominant' here means those discourses which are authoritative and commonly established (Harvey 2013: 50).

[4] *Dolly* was in print until December 2016. It is now an online-only publication.

[5] WordSmith settings throughout: minimum frequency 3, minimum 2.5% of texts, p-value $p<0.0001$. This combination of settings resulted in a manageable quantity of data (Taylor 2013: 99) and yielded enough keywords to offer insights into the common linguistic features and thematic focus of the DDD corpus. Apostrophes were allowed within words, hence contractions are treated as one word. The log-likelihood formula calculates the observed frequency with the expected frequency of a particular word, taking into account the size of the study and reference corpora (Rayson & Garside 2000: 3). The higher the log-likelihood, the more 'key' a word is. Throughout this paper, keyword lists are sorted in order of log-likelihood, i.e., in order of keyness (default sort).

[6] The categories in Table 3 are adapted from Harvey (2012: 358). Table 3 excludes keywords which are general e.g., *do, talk* and *things*. Words are classified under multiple categories based on evidence from concordances. For example *vagina* may occur in a question concerning sex, as in *When I have sex the muscles inside my* ***vagina*** *tense up…* (1995_3_Q15), or it may occur in a question where someone is unhappy with their body, as in *My vaginal hairs have been really agitating me lately. When I last checked, my hairs were actually inside my* ***vagina****...* (2014_2_Q4). See note 8 for explanation of file IDs.

[7] *Trusted* and *trust* are classified under 'people and relationships' as this overwhelming occurs in constructions such as *trusted adult* and *someone you trust*.

[8] Throughout this paper, file IDs are included when giving examples. For example, 1995_8_Q2 is the second question from the eighth (August) issue of 1995.

[9] Where there are too many instances of a word for all concordance lines to be displayed, I use the 'Reduce to N' function in WordSmith which randomly selects N concordance lines. Throughout, 'randomly selected concordance lines' refers to using this function.

[10] These data are presented as *percentage* of texts to account for the different number of texts in each sub-corpus (see Table 1).