
The Benefits of Ambiguity: Methodological Insights from Researching ‘Heterosexual Casual Sex’

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Casual sex has been defined in many ways but is mainly seen as one-off or brief sexual contact in an ‘uncommitted relationship’ (see Paul et al., 2000), increasingly visible among young adults. Whilst one-off sexual encounters have most likely been part of western sexual history for a long time, the term ‘casual sex’ itself is a relatively new construct, situated within a permissive sexual discourse (Hollway, 1989), and part of a broader shift in the ‘sexualisation of culture’¹ (Gill, 2008; McNair, 2002). Contradictory constructions of heterosexual casual sex exist in the West. Based on traditional discourses, casual sex (particularly women’s) is seen as ‘wrong’ and the appropriate site for engaging in heterosexual sex is seen as within a monogamous relationship. However, based on permissive, post-feminist and liberal discourses, it is assumed that men *and* women are sexually ‘liberated’ and free to pursue and engage in (casual) sexual encounters with whom they choose, as long as it is a mutually desired exchange and sexual safety is a priority. A ‘sexual double standard’ (see Crawford and Popp, 2003) has long positioned men and women differently when it comes to casual sex: men as ‘studs’; women as ‘sluts’ (Farvid, 2006).

I have been researching heterosexual casual sex since 2004, for my master’s and my (on-going) PhD theses. Comparing and contrasting the framing of these two projects and the interview questions, I carry out a reflexive inquiry into some methodological issues I encountered while researching casual sex. Feminist psychologists have long been emphasizing the importance of reflexive inquiry at each stage of the research process (e.g. Wilkinson, 1988), including considering our own assumptions about research design and analysis (e.g. O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994). In this article, I discuss how explicit use of the term ‘casual sex’ in my master’s project (re)produced talk of ‘ideal’ casual sex by women who claimed a casual sex identity. In my PhD, a focus on a more in-depth and critical analysis of a range of casual sex experiences, (re)produced varied accounts from people who often did not align themselves with a casual sex identity. Reflections about my methodological strategy (i.e. recruitment style and interview questioning) in the master’s project were fundamental in shaping the PhD.

YOUNG HETEROSEXUAL WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF CASUAL SEX

My master's research explored young heterosexual women's ideas and experiences related to casual sex. Advertisement posters calling for participants (aged 18–25) had a large eye-catching title 'Casual Sex', and read: 'Female research participants are required for a thesis project investigating women's experiences of casual sex'. The study attracted participants who *identified* themselves as someone who engages in casual sex. The topic also seemed to be particularly meaningful to the women, who were eager to tell me their stories. A semi-structured interview approach allowed the participants some part in directing the conversation. Questions related to (a) meanings around casual sex; (b) women's experiences of casual sex; and (c) women's ideas of societal perceptions related to casual sex. Interview questions asked *directly* about 'casual sex', for example: *What do you define/consider 'casual sex'? Tell me about a salient/poignant experience of casual sex you've had? Do you personally think it is acceptable for women/men to have casual sex? What about how society perceives casual sex and women/men – is it acceptable?*

The women drew predominantly on 'liberal' and 'permissive' discourses and framed casual sex as 'good' and 'fun'. The following account offers a good example of how the women framed casual sex:

Becca: Just having fun for the moment ... you're just doing it purely for kind of recreational sex kind of reasons, rather than for any kind of um stable relationship ... you can have a bit of like fun with the person but without all the strings attached. (aged 23)

The women also depicted casual sex as 'emotionless' and as 'sex for sex's sake':

Pani: What would you say that um, makes it casual specifically?

Mel: You're not in it for any other purpose, just for sex y'know not um, no feelings involved or emotions or anything like that. (aged 19)

Overall, the interviews produced 'positive' accounts of young women's casual sex as well as a culturally pervasive story of what casual sex supposedly 'is' (i.e. 'emotionless' sex for sex's sake). In addition, my own assumptions about casual sex (e.g. casual sex as about the desire for 'sex'), limited the possibility for a more in-depth and critical analysis of casual sex. For instance, is casual sex always about 'the sex'? Is casual sex always devoid of *all* emotion (e.g. excitement)? Using the phrase 'casual sex' explicitly during recruitment and interviewing, as well as my own assumptions about casual sex, meant that other potential accounts of casual sex were not explored.

'LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX ...'

The focus of my PhD research evolved to try and understand these and other issues. This project was framed more generally about 'heterosexual sex',

although my key interest remained in casual sex. The study was entitled 'Let's talk about sex ...' as was the recruitment poster. Advertising called for women, and men, aged 18 years and over, to volunteer for an interview about their ideas and experiences related to heterosexual sex in 'different contexts' (e.g. 'one-off' sexual encounters, longer-term relationship sex). My intention was to avoid using the term 'casual sex', which seemed to automatically invoke certain cultural discourses. By broadening the scope, I also wanted to increase the pool of potential respondents (i.e. not just people who *identified* as actively taking part in casual sex).

Similar methodological techniques were deployed by feminists researching rape in the late 1970s and early 1980s (e.g. Koss and Oros 1982; Russell, 1982). For example, instead of using non-random samples of already identified 'rape victims' to research the prevalence and characteristics of rape, Diana Russell and her team interviewed women who were selected by a random sampling of households. These researchers also devised interview and survey questions that focused on particular behaviours or sexual scenarios that could identify women's experiences of unwanted sex, rather than blatantly asking 'have you ever been raped?'.² By deploying an indirect sampling strategy and indirect interview questioning about the topic of interest, that research dramatically altered the understanding of the scope and prevalence of unwanted sex. Similarly, I hoped that a less direct methodological strategy would be useful for a more in-depth and critical analysis of heterosexual casual sex.

I recruited and interviewed 15 men and 15 women (aged 18–46) (although I only draw on the women's accounts for this article, to parallel the master's project). The interviews were again semi-structured, but the wording of the questions was considered more thoroughly and designed to probe more subtly scenarios that might be considered casual sex, and the feelings and ideas that went along with such experiences. For example: *Have you ever had a one-off sensual/sexual encounter? Have you ever had a 'brief' or short-lived sexual encounter? Out of the whole spectrum of feelings, what were some of the feelings that went along with it? What was going through your mind at the time?*

Overall, this project attracted women with more divergent sexual experiences in relation to each other and to those who took part in the master's project. Nearly all had engaged in some brief or one-off sexual encounter that could be considered casual sex, although not all *identified* as someone who had 'had' casual sex. The interviews produced more varied accounts of casual sex, with the women drawing on 'permissive' as well as 'traditional' discourses when accounting for casual sex. Casual sex was not depicted as only about the 'sex', but about human contact, excitement of meeting and getting to know a new person, the fun of flirtation and the pursuit of pleasure. However, one-off sexual encounters were also often represented as disappointing or awkward by some, for example:

Pani: So, the one night stands, generally the sex has been, how would you rate –
Whina: Yeah, the one night stands ... below average.

Pani: Hmmm what made it below average or what made it not so good?

Whina: Drunken, alcohol, um not knowing them, awkward, not knowing their body, y'know not knowing where things go, they don't know how I like things, I don't know how they like things ... (aged 23)

Casual sex was often portrayed negatively as not 'fun' or enjoyable, or as an 'uncomfortable' sexual situation *as well as* positively (e.g. exciting), for example:

Pani: Your [casual] sexual encounters, were they pleasurable?

Sadie: Most were pleasurable.

Pani: Yeah.

Sadie: Ah I think it was the excitement of the first time you know, the first time there's always the special excitement, it's not always the best time ...

Pani: Hmmm ...

Sadie: ... but it's got its special excitement. (aged 38)

Stories in the PhD research tended to portray both the potential 'pains' (e.g. awkwardness) *alongside* the 'pleasures' (e.g. excitement) of casual sex. In many of the accounts, 'emotions' such as excitement or awkwardness were relayed as part of casual sex, rendering a casual sex encounter – real or potential – quite differently from the 'emotion-free' way casual sex was constructed in the master's project. The PhD project thus provided a different overall story of women's heterosexual casual sex. These narratives disrupted the culturally dominant ways casual sex is often constructed, producing alternative accounts of heterosexual casual sex practice.

FRAMING RESEARCH/TELLING STORIES

I have discussed how alternative framing of projects on the same 'topic' can produce quite different research outcomes. However, I am not interpreting this in realist terms – that there were different casual sex stories 'out there' for me to find and document. Rather, it illustrates the co-constituted process of qualitative research (e.g. Finlay, 2002), such that the data and outcomes of research are shaped by my actions as much as by participants. Decisions about recruitment style and interview questioning, as well as the aims of my research, influenced the stories I told in my analyses.

My experience of researching heterosexual casual sex not only highlights the continued importance of active reflection in qualitative and feminist research (e.g. Finlay and Gough, 2003; Franklin, 1997; Lather, 1991) for maintaining an awareness of how we, as researchers, shape the stories we (re)produce in/through our research, but also how the research itself is implicated in (re)shaping us, and our future research directions. It is rarely discussed in what ways (and how) 'we' learn from our research, and a more explicit engagement with this can be useful for others undertaking qualitative research.

The overall outcomes of these two projects also illustrate the value of creative

and indirect methodological strategies for extending the discursive terrain associated with relatively 'new' or under-researched cultural constructs, such as, but not limited to, heterosexual casual sex.

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NOTES

1. This phrase refers to the western cultural shift towards more permissive sexual attitudes, the proliferation of sexual texts, and a preoccupation with sexual identities and practices (Attwood, 2006).
2. Concurrent with the wide acceptance of 'rape myths' (Burt, 1980), many women were seen as reluctant to label their experiences of unwanted sex as 'rape', particularly in the absence of the use of weapon, violence or if the perpetrator was known to them (see Gavey, 2005 for a full discussion).

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