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Casual sex as ‘not a natural act’ and other regimes of truth about heterosexuality*

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Abstract

This paper analyses online texts concerning the supposed ‘rules’ and ‘etiquette’ of heterosexual casual sex, exploring how ‘ideal’ casual sex was constructed – as object and practice. We examine how casual sex was constituted by authors who positioned themselves as knowledgeable and/or expert in relation to casual sex and demonstrate the discourses that their accounts drew on in constructing archetypal casual sex. Our analysis is situated within feminist/critical theorising and debates regarding the institution of heterosexuality and, in particular, construction of monogamy as ‘ideal’ when it comes to heterosexual relationships. We argue that casual sex was constituted as *not a natural act* through the specific instructions of how to ‘do casual sex right’. We outline the construction of an *attraction imperative* in relation to casual sex, its *hierarchies of respectability*, and address what an analysis about casual sex tells us about contemporary heterosexuality. This paper demonstrates that although casual sex *could* possibly offer an alternative to the currently pervasive mononormativity, it fails to provide this in accounts of ‘ideal’ casual sex as relayed in the public arena.

Keywords

Casual sex, gender, heterosexuality, monogamy, sex advice

*The first part of our title was inspired by the work of Leonore Tiefer (2004).

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'The paradigm has shifted. Dating is dated. Hooking up is here to stay'
Charles Blow (2008), *New York Times*

The rhetoric evident above is quite common within the public arena when it comes to casual sex. Cultural representations of heterosexual casual sex are currently common within West (Farvid and Braun, 2013) and prevalent in news articles (e.g. Marcotty, 2009; Ramirez, 2005), magazine articles (e.g. Grigoriadis, 2003; McGinn, 2008), current affairs pieces (e.g. TVNZ, 2008), online blogs (e.g. Boodram, 2010; Preston, 2007) and opinion pieces (e.g. Makow, 2005; Perry, 2010). News reports often describe the prevalence or nature of casual sex (e.g. Preidt, 2010; Wilson, 2009) with some 'cautionary' articles about the drawbacks of casual sex, particularly for woman (e.g. Hemmingway, 2004; Simmons, 2010). The hugely successful television show *Sex and the City* (1998–2004, HBO) is often cited as directly representing (and validating) *women's* engagement in casual sex. Recently, a casual sex smart phone application (*Blendr*) was developed for the heterosexual market (Hill, 2011), following the popularity of *Grindr* (Whitehill, 2006) which targeted gay, bisexual and questioning men. A comedy series about casual sex called *Friends with Benefits*, and two feature films (*Friends with Benefits* and *No Strings Attached*) both dealing with the topic of casual sex, were released in 2011. Media accounts have questioned whether a casual sex or 'hookup' culture has replaced more conventional forms of dating or relationships, and such a potential trend is often depicted negatively (e.g. Gustafson, 2008; Wilson, 2009). Has casual sex or 'hooking up' so dramatically replaced conventional dating as espoused by many commentators? Are we seeing a shift in heteronormative discourse, making conventional dating and perhaps life-long monogamy, less desirable or commonplace? We examine such questions with regards to 'the rules' and norms of casual sex on offer in the public forum and relate this to recent theorising around mononormativity and heterosexuality.

Heterosexual casual sex

Casual sex typically refers to one-off or fleeting sexual encounters between recently met strangers, acquaintances, or friends (Farvid, 2010, 2011). Such an encounter may last one night, occur over a few meetings, or involve a long-term casual sex arrangement. Although typically governed by a coital imperative (McPhillips et al., 2001), other casual sexual practices include touching, kissing, and oral sex (Paul and Hayes, 2002; Paul et al., 2000). What renders these scenarios as *casual* sex, is that they (ostensibly) occur outside the context of a committed, romantic, and longer-term sexual relationship and typically occur between 'single' people where there may or may not be any investment in the future of the relationship. Those involved are typically required to view casual sex as *just* about 'the sex', excluding romantic feelings, or seeking longer-term relational commitment from their casual sex partners (Farvid and Braun, 2013). Research examining heterosexual casual sex has tended to rely on, and perpetuate, a number of taken-for-

granted assumptions. These include the notion that casual sex is automatically a 'risky' sexual practice (Cooper, 2002; Littleton et al., 2009; Paul and Hayes, 2002), approached/experienced differently by men and women (Heldman and Wade, 2010; Herold and Mewhinney, 1993; Paul et al., 2000) and occurring mostly in specific social contexts (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2003; Rosenthal et al., 1998). Some have referred to a 'hook up culture' as replacing conventional dating (Bogle, 2008), although others see this as an exaggeration (Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009). The current research builds on previous casual sex literature by highlighting how 'the rules' and norms of casual sex, which are socially and culturally produced in the public forum in very specific ways, construct the nature, and the meanings, associated with the practice.

Mononormativity

Marriage and, in more contemporary times, monogamy, have been constructed as the ideal way to have a heterosexual relationship; the pinnacle of all heterosexual unions (Jackson and Scott, 2004; Robinson, 1997; Stelboum, 1999) and the desired outcome of dating or relationships. This 'mononormativity' (Pieper and Bauer, 2005, cited in Barker and Langdrige, 2010a) is the dominant discourse within the west, existing alongside, and privileging (romantic) 'love' relationships over other types of relationships (e.g. friendships) (Jackson and Scott, 2004; Robinson, 1997). Since the dominant assumptions of the normalcy and naturalness of monogamy are analogous to the assumptions around heterosexuality, inherent in the term heteronormativity (Barker and Langdrige, 2010b), it has garnered similar critiques from feminists and critical theorists (Barker and Langdrige, 2010b, 2010c; Jackson and Scott, 2004; Robinson, 1997), and been termed mononormativity.

Mononormativity refers to 'the relations of power that stem from the belief that the monogamous dyad is a *natural*, morally correct and *essential* aspect of relating and being human' (Finn, 2012: 124, emphasis added). The prominence placed on life-long heterosexual unions (and romantic love) is socially and culturally *produced* but 'naturalised' within the institution of heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) and heavily tied to notions of 'happiness' and containment within the private sphere; 'psycho-logising coupledness as an exclusive and stabilising intimate domain' (Finn, 2012: 128). Such conventional heteronormative relationships have long been critiqued by feminist theorists, who have problematised the institution of heterosexuality for being predicated on gender *difference* and maintaining unequal power relations between men and women (e.g. Jackson, 1995a, 1999; Rich, 1980; Richardson, 1996; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993). 'Compulsory monogamy' (Heckert, 2010) is argued to keep in place such asymmetrical power relations:

Institutional monogamy has not served women's best interests. It privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through the mechanism of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance (Robinson, 1997: 144).

The cultural ideal of monogamy is theorised as one of the 'norms' that keeps heterosexuality as an institution in place and patriarchal power relations intact (e.g. Coveney et al., 1984; Firestone, 1971; Jackson and Scott, 2004). The traditional heterosexual arrangement is asymmetrically labour-intensive for women, requiring emotional, sexual and domestic 'upkeep', even if they do paid work outside the home (e.g. Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Jamieson, 1998; Van Every, 1996). Exclusivity to one man also takes women away from friends, communities and other networks involved in political activism (Rosa, 1994) and disallows alternative, non-dyadic, sexualities and intimacies which might function within an 'unbounded plurality' to flourish (Finn, 2012: 133).

The question examined in this paper is whether casual sex might offer some fissures in the construction of mononormativity in heterosexual relating and/or potentially discursively disrupt this aspect of heteronormativity. The analysis that follows indicates that although casual sex *could* offer an alternative to at least 'monogamy', and potentially to normative heterosexuality, it fails to provide this, at least in accounts of 'ideal' casual sex as relayed in the public arena. Monogamy remains profoundly the ideal, speaking to the state of 'compulsory monogamy' within heterosexuality (Heckert, 2010).

Method

a) Data

The data analysed here come from a larger project examining the social construction of heterosexual casual sex (Farvid, 2011) and were gathered from online sources providing information and advice regarding casual sex to a (typically) gender-neutral audience. The data were collected through identical web searches, using a number of Google search engines. Search engines of English speaking countries that were considered similar in culture were selected: Google New Zealand (www.google.co.nz); Google Australia (www.google.au.com); Google United States (www.google.com) and Google United Kingdom (www.google.co.uk). The following phrases, all various forms of terminology for 'casual sex' (Farvid, 2011), were used as search tools in each search engine: *casual sex*; *hookup(s)*; *friends with benefits*; *one night stand(s)*; *booty call* and *fuck buddy*. The internet searches were carried out on 13 and 14 October 2009 in Auckland New Zealand. Certain web pages were excluded: definitional/dictionary entries, books, book reviews, classified advertisements and online dating sites. Articles that were retained as data include: blogs, opinion pieces, news articles and online magazines. The first ten 'hits' generated by each of the searches matching the selection criteria were retained and the content copied and pasted into an electronic document. This produced 385 pages of data which were subsequently coded and analysed discursively. The data quotes used in this analysis came from 28 different articles and when quoting them we denote the article number and the country of origin (e.g. NZ1), the name of the piece and the web address.

b) Ethical considerations

The use of online material in qualitative research, often referred to as 'internet mediated research' (BPS, 2007), occupies an ethical grey area (Whitehead, 2007). The main ethical concerns in this forum relate to conventional ethical guidelines regarding informed consent and participant identifiability (BPS, 2007), but are complicated due to the accessibility and use of people's words without their knowledge. Some argue that most material on the internet is publicly available, hence acquiring consent from the authors of such texts is unnecessary (Walther, 2002). Others suggest that most online material is written with the expectation of privacy and needs to be treated as such (Elgesem, 2002). Although online material defies a clear-cut public/private distinction (Waskul and Douglas, 1996), material that 'is a public act [and] written for an implicit audience' is typically considered 'fair game' (Hookway, 2008: 105). Although still requiring ethical prudence, sites that are considered 'public' (i.e. not requiring informed consent) include: blogs, opinion pieces, online news pieces, and possibly public chat forums. In contrast, closed chat forums, archives of private emails, and membership organisations that do not allow or expect their discussion to be viewed by a/ny public audience, require informed consent. The dataset analysed here (e.g. online magazines) fall into the former category where the authors have made their own identities identifiable and their words/texts are available in Forums and cites that *expect* (and desire) public viewing.

c) Analysis

The discursive analysis conducted here drew on Foucauldian and feminist post-structuralist theorising around language and representations where language and discourse are seen as constitutive of our realities (Gavey, 1989) and subjectivities (Weedon, 1997). Subjectivities offered men and women (Hollway, 1989), within mass media for example, often vary in form, agency and power (Gavey, 2005). From this perspective, discourses are linked to a power/knowledge nexus where particular versions of the world are constructed as more 'truthful' than others, perpetuate dominant cultural understandings, and promote the interests of the powerful (Burr, 2003). Modern *disciplinary power* operates without direct force (Foucault, 1977) with people willingly subjecting themselves to *self-scrutiny* and engaging in self-surveillance, managing their conduct to suit what is considered normative or appropriate behaviour in various contexts (Foucault, 1988). Disciplinary power is diffuse and operates in a phantom-like manner, becoming hard to identify, trace, and resist. Discourse analysis from this perspective examines how discourses constitute social life, bodies and subjectivities (Mills, 2004; Sunderland, 2004) with the aim of making visible the (invisible) operation of power to illustrate the ways in which discourses may allow for and/or constrain particular ways of being. Such an analysis is also concerned with how heterosexual desires and practices are constructed. It seeks to map the ways in which differing

modes of (gendered) subjectivities are mobilised and the implications of this for power relations, heterosexuality and heterosexual practice.

The focus of our analysis was on examining how self-appointed experts or people who positioned themselves as knowledgeable about casual sex constructed and relayed the 'rules' of casual sex in a public form. Once the data were selected, they were read repeatedly by the first author who carried out the initial coding and analysis, in line with the analytic interests stipulated above. Multiple readings and coding sessions resulted in a list of the 'rules' of casual sex, as well as the underlying discourses informing these representations, which were then shared and further analysed in consultation with the second author. Attention was paid to how (casual) heterosex and heterosexuality were constructed, as well as masculinity and femininity within heterosex.

Analysis and discussion

On the internet, we learn that casual sex does not come 'naturally'. Sexual desire was deemed natural, but *casual* sex required guidelines, ground-rules and a code of conduct. This was evident in the numerous online articles about casual sex that included instructions or advice on *how to* engage in casual sex *correctly*. Writers typically positioned themselves as an/the 'authority' on matters related to casual sex and gave advice on the matter by either speaking from experience and proclaiming 'experiential authority' (Kitzinger, 1994), or being positioned as impartial investigators merely relaying the 'facts' of casual sex. Either way, they claimed knowledge and expertise about casual sex and produced a certain 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1988) about casual sex that, as we will demonstrate, (ironically) bolstered (heterosexual) monogamy as the ultimate and ideal way to have a hetero/sexual relationship.

The rules of casual sex

The explicit advice on the supposed 'rules' and 'etiquette' of casual sex were fairly uniform across articles. Casual sex was often depicted as only suited to certain *types* of people:

Casual sex is not for everyone. But if you've got the itch especially bad at a certain point in time, and you feel it's necessary to scratch it . . . well, then, you might want to heed my advice (US2, *6 Tips for How to Have Casual Sex*, Marieclaire.com).

The caveat of 'casual sex not suiting everyone' aside, those engaging in casual sex were depicted as vulnerable to certain 'risks' if they did not follow these rules and guidelines. The ability to detach 'emotions' from sex was depicted as vital in the process of deciding whether or not to engage in casual sex:

While [casual sex] can be good and can be fun, it's not for everyone. . . It takes a certain kind of person to keep emotion out of something that is essentially a very emotive act (NZ1, *The Benefits of Casual Sex*, Stuff.co.nz).

In both these extracts, based on neoliberal (Davies et al., 2006) and permissive (Hollway, 1989) discourses, determining if you can manage a casual sexual situation is left up to the individual. It is depicted as a personal 'choice' and as devoid of cultural expectations, meanings or, social repercussions (see also Braun, 2009; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011). Sex and emotions are inextricably intertwined in a way that casual sex required the right type of 'sexually sophisticated' person who *could* detach sex and emotions.

The articles typically held a 'pro-casual sex' stance. Based on a 'sex imperative' (discussed later) *any* sex was deemed desirable, if individuals were sexually 'enlightened' enough, or had the right personality or attitude to successfully 'manage' casual sex. Although sex and emotions were constructed as ('naturally') inseparable, the most prevalent advice regarding casual sex was that there should be *no* emotions involved:

A booty call should be ended at the first signs of any feelings, either yours or theirs. This is to avoid any serious drama or being ensnared unexpectedly in the trap of a relationship. . . Maybe you noticed you have been thinking about your booty call more than usual: no good. But the big, flashing neon sign that you should abort the booty is when they ask you where the relationship is headed. That's your sign to head for the hills (US5, *When Good Booty Calls Go Bad*, Phetasy.com).

The emotion identified as troublesome for casual sex related only to 'romantic' desires and the desire for emotional intimacy or a committed relationship. Other emotions (such as nervousness or excitement) were rarely portrayed as part of a casual sex experience or as needing to be 'managed' in the same way that romantic emotions did. Romantic emotions are constituted as both the natural outcome of sex, and as an imminent risk of *casual* sex encounters or relationships. There was a very clear and present danger of doing casual sex 'wrong' by getting emotionally and romantically involved.

Authors often explicitly *urged* readers not to get 'too involved' with a casual sex partner; best achieved by avoiding sharing a lot of personal information about themselves or their friends and family. Casual sex candidates were advised to keep interactions 'light and carefree':

Casual sex refers to engaging in the physical act of sex, plain and simple – as you refer to it, a bonking buddy, with the emphasis on the bonking rather than the buddy . . . it involves having each other's phone number and being able to rely on each other for regular sex, at one or either's house, but that's it. No dates, no social outings, no meeting the family, no breakfasts out at cafes, no talk of the future, basically no relating outside a sexual realm (AU4, *Changing Casual Sex to a Serious Relationship*, Ninemsn.com.au).

Keep the emotional baggage light and the mood breezy: Don't talk about family, exes, therapy, or love. And no candle-light (US3, *How to Have a One-Night Stand*, Emandlo.com).

Casual sex was always depicted as *different* to conventional dating or relationship arrangements. In their descriptions of casual sex, these accounts evoked normalised expectation for other (i.e. 'real' or typical) sexual relationships. The instruction of 'no candle-light' emphasises this point: casual sex is not to be romantic; it is supposed to be *only* about sex. Sex and romance are uncoupled and even divorced in these accounts. In this de-coupling, casual sex *may* seem to offer up an alternative to conventional heteronormativity and the 'romance' ideology within monogamy that has permeated heterosexual discourse (Jackson, 1993, 1995b). However, in somewhat of an ironic twist, casual sex discourse fails to provide this alternative, because casual sex is almost always defined *in relation to* and *in opposition to* monogamous romantic relationships (which are still prioritised). Casual sex is 'other' in this heterosexual love/sex/relationship equation and is not to include all the things traditionally associated with conventional dating or monogamy.

Another rule about emotional attachment was to *not* have casual sex with someone you 'love' or 'like'. Casual sex was not a route to a relationship, and individuals were advised it should never be undertaken with that intent (e.g. NZ2); engaging in casual sex with the goal of procuring a relationship was a way of doing casual sex 'wrong'. Another way of doing casual sex erroneously was during moments of emotional fragility:

If you're not feeling emotionally resilient, you're a train wreck waiting to happen. I've had friends who've had periods in their lives where sex is the way they band aid up their heart while it's haemorrhaging everywhere else. If you're having sex with randoms, waking up, regretting it, then doing it all over again week after week, you're not doing anything good for yourself (NZ4, *Casual Sex*, Getfrank.co.nz).

This advice (typically aimed at women) nicely demonstrates one of the lurking 'risks' of doing casual sex incorrectly. 'Regret', in particular, was positioned as undesirable (or not even allowable) when it came to *voluntary* casual sex. 'Good' casual sex was about pleasure (enjoying oneself) and 'good sex'. If casual sex was used as solace for some other emotional pain rather than pure (i.e. unemotional) sexual fulfilment, this was not suitable and produced a negative (and pathological) subject position.

Communication was depicted as *key* in any casual sex encounter (or relationship) as was being *completely* honest. Authors often recommended having a conversation with the other person *before* any sex commenced, to set up the parameters of the encounter:

Be honest: Let's rewind to the beginning of the evening. Between the drinks and dances – but prior to heading back to someone's bed – one of you should clarify expectations. If all you want is a one-night stand, that's fine, but be upfront. If you want more, it's a good idea to bring that up, too. If you utter 'Milano' and he starts jabbering about the two of you on an Italian holiday while you just wanted a cookie [orgasm], it's best to look for someone else with whom to spend the evening (US4, *One-Night Stand Etiquette*, Yourtango.com).

Honesty and communication were constructed as the sensible and ‘mature’ way to approach ideal casual sex and one of the fundamental ‘rules’ for doing it correctly. However, this advice is counter to reports of people’s experiences of (casual) sex. Although sexual communication typically means more satisfaction within a relationship (Byers and Demmons, 1999) its practice is a hard task (Byers, 2005; Lear, 1995), even between intimate long-term partners (Roberts et al., 1995). This ‘rule’ is a good example of how some of the advice sharply contrasted the complicated and contradictory accounts of people’s lived casual sexual experiences (Farvid and Braun, Forthcoming).

Although readers were advised to communicate the boundaries of casual sex, there was no guidance offered regarding *how* to communicate this, echoing magazines’ portrayals of sex as spontaneously and effortlessly occurring, without any sexual negotiation (Farvid and Braun, 2006). Similarly, direct talk of sexual practices and bodies was virtually absent in the data.

Like communication, ‘discretion’ was often depicted as an important part of casual sex:

Tip: One of the keys to being successful FF [fuck friend] is to keep it discreet. Even if you’re 100% confident that you only have to call her and she’ll come running, do the classy thing and keep it between you and her. Don’t brag about the situation to outside friends (AU2, *The Pros & Cons Of Casual Sex Between Friends*, Au.askmen.com).

Getting (casual) sex ‘on demand’ via booty call was depicted as desirable (particularly for men) and as something that justified bragging about. However, readers were advised against this, and ‘bragging’ (by men) was depicted as crude and disrespectful (to women). Long-term casual sex was something that men were depicted as fortunate to ‘get’ and women were ‘giving’ away (Farvid and Braun, 2013). Drawing on a male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984), men were thus depicted as more eager for (casual) sex than women. A woman giving casual sex (away) to a man holds positive identity implications for him (as lucky/studly), and negative identity implications for her (as easy/used).

Ideal casual sex was also *not* to be engaged in when extremely intoxicated:

If you’re completely blotto, catch a taxi and go home ALONE. I had a friend the other week that woke up next to someone, and had no memory of how she got there. Which also means she can’t remember if they used condoms. Sex is good enough to have when sober, or slightly relaxed with one glass of wine – and you’re more likely to have it with someone you actually find pleasant! (NZ4, *Casual Sex*, Getfrank.co.nz).

Having casual sex when ‘drunk’, ‘blotto’ or ‘high’ was deemed risky (especially for woman), not only in terms of ‘safe sex’, but also in terms of ending up with an undesirable casual sex partner (due to supposed impairments in judgment caused by inebriation). This advice also links to another discourse that was evident in the

data: an *attraction imperative*. In seeking casual sex, attraction was depicted as *key* when it came to partner selection:

Have sex with someone completely attracted to you. And vice versa. That's the whole point really isn't it? You want to feel good after it. If you pick well you'll be feeling sexier, happier and more attractive for days (NZ4, *Casual Sex*, Getfrank.co.nz).

Sex with an attractive person is not only depicted as the *purpose* of casual sex, but as having lingering positive identity implications and psychological effects. The 'power' of sex is highlighted and reciprocity is emphasised in terms of having sex with someone completely attractive *and* attracted to you. What subtly lurks in the shadows is the potential for 'choosing badly' and having casual sex with someone who is *not* physically attractive. By implication, casual sex with an unattractive person could have negative identity effects; an unspoken risk of casual sex-partner-selection.

The type of partner one chooses for casual sex was also depicted as *different* to the type of partner one may choose or desire for a long-term romantic relationship:

Let me set the scene for you. It's Friday night and you're out on the town. You're catching up with friends and after a couple of drinks, you feel suitably relaxed. You look across the bar and spot a handsome specimen. You buy a drink and strike up a conversation. On closer inspection, your target is still hot stuff but once they reveal they work in IT, they have a pet ferret or a passion for Delta Goodrem, you realise they're just not relationship material. Instead of walking away and letting the physical attraction go to waste, why not enjoy their company without the expectation of it leading to something more? And this is just one likely scenario when casual sex would be the best option for all involved (AU3, *What's Wrong with Casual Sex?* Yahoo.com).

As this extract demonstrates, casual sex 'instructions' were imbued with the message that finding a partner for a longer-term relationship is, and should be, the ultimate goal for heterosexuals. In this extract, the initial 'pull' is portrayed as physical attraction, however, particular quirks or short-comings of this fictional 'specimen' are said to shatter the potential for a relationship (but not a *casual* sex encounter). Striking is the notion that one should not waste 'attraction' and that attraction should automatically *end* in sex – an attraction imperative. Like kissing in the linear progression of modern heterosex – kissing and foreplay → intercourse → orgasm (Jackson and Scott, 1997, 2001) – this attraction imperative implied that sexual attraction should ideally culminate in casual sex, even if there is no desire or possibility for a romantic, longer-term, monogamous partnership. This constitutes a subtle enticement to casual sex in the absence of relational desires.

Another form of advice was about ‘sexual safety’. Casual sex was constituted as always ‘risky’ in terms of sexually transmissible infections and the route to safety was depicted as condom use:

Always play it safe: That means use condoms all the time, even if you feel you trust the guy. Take a step back and remind yourself of the kind of arrangement you are in – no strings attached means exactly that. You are both free to see and date other people (NZ10, *Heartbroken? Try a ‘Mini-Ship’*, Nzgirl.co.nz).

Now I don’t want to hear any arguments on this one – you must absolutely, positively use protection at all times. Even if she claims she’s on the Pill, you still have to wear a condom because there’s a lot more potential damage available than just a baby. STDs are horrible and can even lead to death, and no night of passion is worth your funeral (AU8, *Be Prepared For A One-Night Stand*, Au.askmen.com).

The riskiness of casual sex is mobilised by its non-monogamous nature. Condomless sex is, by implication, potentially acceptable in a monogamous scenario, but *not* in casual sex. These depictions reinforce and perpetuate the construction of casual sex as ‘risky sex’ (Farvid, 2011), position relationship sex as safe (Willig, 1997), and depict condoms as offering *assurances* against infection in spite of the possible likelihood of infidelity (Duncombe et al., 2004). Although messages like this are positive in the sense that they promote a safer form of coitus, the bolstering of condom use as a means to ‘safe sex’ perpetuates a coital imperative (McPhillips et al., 2001) by implying that (casual) sex must or typically involves penis–vagina–intercourse. Hence, this advice has mixed implications for constructions of heterosexuality.

In summary, getting casual sex ‘right’ required following a definitive set of rules which included: keeping one’s emotions ‘in-check’ during casual sex, not having casual sex with someone you have ‘feelings’ for, being in an emotionally resilient state before engaging in casual sex, setting the ground rules of casual sex *before* having sex, being discrete, not having casual sex while intoxicated or ‘high’, and using condoms. These (disciplinary) ‘rules’ of how to engage this form of sex, position it as atypical and a paradoxically ‘unnatural’ form of relating among heterosexuals. Whilst seemingly pro-casual sex, this advice also reworked some of the traditional constructions of the ‘hierarchies of respectability’ (Warner, 1999) in relation to heterosexuality.

A new hierarchy of respectability

A sex/gender hierarchy, coined by Rubin (1984), positions casual sex *outside* the ‘charmed circle’ of normative heterosexuality. Notably, within the data, such ‘hierarchies of respectability’ (Warner, 1999) were not only implicated in the stratification of people around sex/relationship type, but also in relation to differing forms of *casual* sex. The hierarchy of sex/relationships, from most ideal to least ideal was

evident: at the pinnacle, monogamous relationships with ‘The One’; monogamous relationships; dating in search of ‘The One’; long-term casual sex relationships (e.g. friends with benefits, fuck buddies); a one-night stand; and finally, at the bottom, a booty call. ‘Booty calls’ (a call or text late in the evening or in the early hours of the morning, purely for the purpose of meeting for sex) were depicted as the least desirable form of (casual) sex.

Notably, in this hierarchy of sex/relationships, the more *emotionally* involved or committed a sexual relationship, the *higher* its status. Although sex ostensibly holds an important position in determining relationships (Jackson and Scott, 2004), here it is the ‘emotional’ involvement, the involvement *beyond* sex, that increased the status and meaning of a relationship. Within the hierarchy outlined above, the same physical act of sex was constituted differently if it did not involve emotional intimacy. Sex was effectively depicted as *detachable* from emotions – as though sex and emotions can be compartmentalised depending on the level of *relational* involvement two people have – but ideally as taking place in an emotional context. These depictions not only indicate the privileging of emotional attachment within sexual relations over relationships based just on ‘sex’, but also produce a discursive field regarding what is the ‘ideal’ way to have a sexual relationship (one which should include emotional intimacy and commitment).

The construction of (hetero)sexuality in casual sex advice

We now turn our analytic focus to examining the broader systems of meaning related to sex and sexuality that were evident within the data. All articles were governed by an underlying (liberationist) ‘sex imperative’ (see Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004b) where *all* or *any* sex was both overtly and subtly depicted as desirable:

Even if it wasn’t the greatest sex ever at least we both got laid. To quote the notable film *Threesome*, to me sex is like pizza. Even if it’s bad it’s still pretty good (NZ5, *Etiquette Guide for Casual Sex*, AOL.co.nz).

Such depictions reflect the ‘pro-sex’ environment of contemporary western culture (Tiefer, 2004b) where having sex is depicted as nearly vital as eating or drinking water – something one needs, so attaining any form of it is better than none. Sex itself was also portrayed as having positive and euphoric effects:

Sex is a drug – a potent and overwhelming drug that both excites and relaxes us. Research has shown that for a person to reach orgasm, a primary requirement is that they must let go of all fear and anxiety. Oxytocin is the kicker. It’s this chemical, released during sex, that is thought to reduce stress levels - leading to relaxation. Ergo, sex is literally good for your mental health. This is definitely positive news for singletons engaging in the “tap and dash” (NZ1, *The Benefits of Casual Sex*, Stuff.co.nz).

Such a link between sexual ‘release’ and positive effects on mental health appear to reflect the lingering legacy of Freud’s theorising about human sexuality; Freud

(1905/2000) positioned sexuality as a (repressed) internal drive that requires 'release'. Failure to procure an outlet for this sexual desire was said to lead to a build-up of sexual tension or 'frustration'. The cathartic release of this 'pent-up' sexual energy was thus constructed as *necessary* for one's mental health, a notion (re)articulated in the extract above.

A biological reductionism underpinned most of the accounts, echoing a 'biological turn' in media representations of sex/sexuality which have prevailed over humanistic or holistic frameworks, for over three decades (Tiefer, 2004a). For example, oxytocin (a hormone that is said to be involved in childbirth and breast feeding; see Gimpl and Fahrenholz, 2001) was often depicted in the data as responsible for a myriad of psychological responses to sex. Commonly referred to as the 'love hormone' or 'cuddle chemical' in the public arena (e.g. Cook, 2008; Scieurious, 2009) oxytocin was portrayed as responsible for 'bonding' people who had sex together (particularly bonding women *to* men). For example, in the same article the author goes on to say:

Oxytocin, also known as the 'cuddle chemical', is also the enemy to anyone engaging in casual encounters. This shifty chemical comes with an equally sneaky side effect known as 'pair bonding' – the FWB [friends with benefits] enemy – the sudden primal urge to become attached and connect with the other person. Advice to singletons who have a booty call? When you feel this sensation kick in – abort! Abort! You simply must rage against the prehistoric urges to begin naming your children/planning your wedding/designing your dream home with this person, otherwise you're defeating the purpose and no longer engaging in casual sex (NZ1, *The Benefits of Casual Sex*, Stuff.co.nz).

Mainstream sexology itself remains governed, amongst other things, by a biological and reproductive model of sexuality (Nicolson, 1993) with an enduring focus on 'sex differences'. The knowledge this type of research produces tends to support and perpetuate the (heterosexist/heteronormative) commonsense (e.g. that women are more relational and men more sexual). Because it is constituted as 'neutral' and 'objective', scientific discourse claiming such 'sex differences' becomes hard to refute and were frequently perpetuated as 'truths' within the texts analysed.

However 'unnatural', casual sex is typically depicted as being about 'the sex'. Sex and sexual desire are predominantly depicted as the primary reason people should have casual sex:

Just like all of the other species in the animal kingdom, we have needs. Sometimes these needs are of a sexual nature. Why not satisfy your urges with a little no-strings-attached loving? (AU3, *What's Wrong with Casual Sex?* Yahoo.com).

Sexual desire was framed in biological terms, and as an inherent part of the (ungendered) human condition; casual sex was offered as a good solution for satiating this 'natural' desire for sex. The satisfaction of such an urge was clearly depicted in relation to sex when one is *not* in an already established

relationship – ‘cheating’ was not represented as acceptable casual sex conduct; such an ‘urge’ whilst in a relationship was *not* to be enacted. Casual sex was situated as filling a ‘sexual gap’ when *not* in a committed relationship or whilst still looking ‘for love’:

‘Friends with benefits’ is often employed by people who don’t have time for a real romance, but still want to get some action (without misleading dates and breaking hearts). You can get what you want – and not have to go through the charade of flirting, buying drinks, trying to figure out what each other wants (NZ6, *Gent’s Guide to the One-Night Stand*, Asylum.com).

While many of us are looking for that special someone to spend our lives with, the single life dictates that sometimes the opportunity for companionship presents itself in the form of a one-night stand. While a one-time roll in the hay is not exactly emotionally fulfilling, sex in any form can be relaxing, enjoyable, and fun (AU7, *One-Night Stand*, Rsvp.com.au).

Here, casual sex is depicted as a ‘short-cut’ to sex for single people who do not have the time or opportunity for a ‘true’ romance. Casual sex is constituted as not a ‘whole’ sexual experience – a whole experience would include sexual *and* emotional fulfilment, found in a romantic relationship, but as serving a ‘sexual release’ function. Such accounts are based on a ‘sex imperative’ and the desire or need for sex in one’s life is depicted as very strong. Sex without intimacy (i.e. casual sex) is subtly depicted as more effortless to obtain, but as ultimately less fulfilling, than sex in a relationship where intimacy is assumed to always occur. The truth relayed here is that casual sex is not emotionally involved or fulfilling. The assumption that sex *needs* to fulfil an emotional function is a construction that is specifically located in modern discourses of sex. Currently, the ideal of the ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens, 1992) requires sex to include overwhelming emotional and physical qualities within committed relationships (Jamieson, 1999).

The emphasis on a certain degree of emotional intimacy being required to render sex as a full experiences, could be part of the lingering effects of the ‘sexualisation of love’ in early- to mid-Twentieth Century, within the west (see Seidman, 1991). In their efforts to ‘sexualise love’, and channel heterosexual sexual desire into monogamy, during a time of great gender flux (Seidman, 1991), marriage manual writers arguably ‘emotionalised sex’ in such a way that supposedly ‘emotion-free’ casual forms of sex are always constituted as deficient to other forms of sex that include emotional intimacy. The discourse of the ‘pure relationship’ itself is governed by a tacit acceptance that emotional intimacy and a satisfying sex life are part of the ideal heterosexual (monogamous) arrangement. The possibility that a casual encounter could be emotionally involved or intimate is rendered obsolete, as qualities such as intimacy are assumed to take time to develop and are closely tied to sex in ongoing relationships.

Relationships occupied a contradictory position in relation to casual sex. They were (idealistically) situated as the ‘pinnacle’ of all sexual relationships, as

necessary and inherently good. Finding 'The One' was deemed the ultimate (albeit not *urgent*) goal for (all) single (heterosexual) people. Simultaneously however, relationships were also often represented as limiting one's freedom and as more arduous than casual sex:

Sex with your FWB [friends with benefits] can be extremely rewarding, because though you trust and respect him or her, you don't have to worry about the daily complications a committed relationship presents (NZ6, *Gent's Guide to the One-Night Stand*, Asylum.com).

So, relationships were sometimes conversely depicted as involved and requiring hard 'work' (Boynton, 2003), something that casual sex is (supposedly) liberated from. The notion that casual sex is 'less work' than a relationship is what makes it 'attractive' (although, paradoxically, doing casual sex does not come 'naturally' and also requires 'work' in following a set of specific rules). However, this does not dislodge the primacy given to committed relationships within the data, which remains intact as a competing (but ultimately more privileged) discourse.

Overall, regardless of the context of sex, the data were underpinned by a strong sex imperative, where any opportunity for (casual) sex should be taken up, if at all possible. Hence, the sexual imperative was part of an 'urging' to casual sex, an 'enticement' to casual sex, where readers were encouraged to cater to their (natural) sexual 'needs' by filling relational gaps with casual sexual encounters.

Conclusion

In this paper we have demonstrated that in (self-proclaimed) expert accounts, casual sex was governed by a sex imperative and an attraction imperative, and located within a hierarchical discursive field, where the pinnacle of all sex relationships was monogamy with 'The One', and the most 'demeaning' was being on the receiving end of a booty call. Through the articulation of all the rules and etiquettes regarding casual sex that individuals are advised to obey – against their 'natural' instincts – casual sex is constituted as an 'unnatural' act (particularly for women) that needs to be learnt. The advice offered produces a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1988) about casual sex that constituted it as not occurring 'naturally,' unlike other forms of sex. What is positioned as natural, particularly when we consider the new hierarchies of respectability and the role of 'emotions' in sex – are monogamous (long-term) relationships.

Paradoxically then, the discourses of (ideal) casual sex work to reinforce monogamy as the *ultimate* way to have a heterosexual sexual relationship. Casual sex is constructed as a *temporary* sexual scenario, as fulfilling an inherent need for sex when single, but as not *replacing* monogamous sex in committed relationships as the pinnacle and most desired way to have a sex/love relationship. This is an important theoretical addition to feminist theorising around (hetero)sexuality and women's sexuality. Acts that may appear transgressive of heteronormative practices, need to be considered carefully within the *context* which they are

produced (e.g. Evans et al., 2010). In the public realm, casual sex is not discursively constituted as a fulfilling or viable long-term *alternative* to heteronormative monogamy, but is instead firmly located on its periphery; as temporary, transient, and not a *whole* sexual experience. Far from providing any discursive fissures to heteronormative practices such as monogamy, casual sex, in this context, works discursively to *support* and reinforce the state of compulsory monogamy (Heckert, 2010) within heterosexuality.

Feminist efforts to dismantle mononormativity and its privileged position within heteronormativity also need to consider one of the key insights our analysis has yielded: the prominence given to ‘emotional intimacy’ within heterosexuality. Future research could further examine the meanings of emotional intimacy within heterosexual relationships and how the requirement for such a ‘bond’ shapes heterosexual relational desires in mononormative ways. A critical deconstruction of emotional intimacy – and its presumed exclusive/long-term nature – could be a vital mechanism for dismantling the pervasive mononormativity evident with contemporary heterosexuality.

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