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"OH IT WAS GOOD SEX!"

Heterosexual women's (counter)narratives
of desire and pleasure in casual sex

Panteá Farvid

Pani: Did you instigate the initial casual sex?

Nicky: Yeah.

Pani: Okay, why?

Nicky: 'Cos I was horny! (laughs)

The articulation of sexual desire above has not been typical of women's talk about heterosex. Female heterosexuality has traditionally been constructed as passive and responsive to male sexuality (Gavey & McPhillips, 1999), associated with reproduction (Hollway, 1989) and as tightly bound to emotionality or romantic love (Wetherell, 1995). Within this framework, female sexual desire has been described as elusive (Tolman, 2002), missing (Fine, 1988), not physically located (Holland *et al.*, 1998), and relationally focused (Farvid & Braun, 2006). While growing up, adolescent girls are taught to silence their sexual desires and substitute sexual feelings in their bodies with a desire for relationships and emotional attachment to boys/men (Allen, 2005; Tolman, 2002). These constructions do not leave much room for adolescent girls to occupy a sexual subjectivity where they see themselves as desiring sexual beings who have the right to sexual choice, sexual pleasure and sexual safety. As Deborah Tolman (2002) notes, "sexual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity [and] sexual decision making" hence, "it is not only unfair to deny female adolescent sexual desire but ultimately unsafe and unhealthy" (p. 6).

Researchers have typically had trouble locating the 'physicality' of female sexual desire (Holland, *et al.*, 1998) and women's bodily pleasures during heterosex (Welles, 2005). For example, research carried out by Holland and her colleagues (1998) has found that despite a focus on sexuality and sexual practices in their interviews with young heterosexual women, "female sexuality is present, but obliquely, and is largely disembodied" (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 108), missing a physicality that is typically regarded as integral to sexual practice. Traditional

constructions of modest, good, and decent femininity required women to construct a passive body – not an active desiring female sexuality (Holland *et al.*, 1998). Research examining female sexual desire has also pointed to a missing discourse of “bodily desire” (Jackson & Cram, 2003, p. 120), where girls and women have difficulty in talking about the physical aspects of desire and construct it as responsive to male needs, bodies, and desires (Holland *et al.*, 1998). Holland and colleagues (1998) have referred to this as the appropriation of female desire by the ‘male in the head’, arguing that there is a lack of *positive* discourses about women’s sexuality and desires, which are central to challenging women’s lack of power within heterosex.

Passive femininity within heterosex has been identified as an “unsafe sexual strategy” (p. 384) for women in terms of sexual health (Shefer & Foster, 2001, p. 384). The missing discourse of female sexual desire also positions women as responsible for an uncontrollable male sexuality (Lowe, 2005), where they are deemed responsible for enforcing safer sex practices (Beres & Farvid, 2010), but without the power to necessarily do so (Gavey & McPhillips, 1999). Feminists have thus convincingly problematized traditional constructions of female sexuality as a risky positioning for women that also denies them a positive and powerful sexual subjectivity (Hollway, 1995).

Contemporary (re)constructions of female heterosexuality

Recent social and cultural shifts within the West indicate that a well-demonstrated “missing discourse of desire” (Fine, 1988, p. 29) has developed fissures. Within the public domain, female sexuality is increasingly depicted as active and desiring, albeit in complicated and contradictory ways (Evans *et al.*, 2010; Gill, 2008). Discourses of choice, agency, and empowerment, typically associated with the tenets of second-wave feminism, have been co-opted in a postfeminist cultural climate and used to create new (sexist) requirements for female heterosexuality (Gill, 2009a). The introduction and popularity of pole dancing classes as a form of aerobic activity, for example, signals this contentious relationship between empowerment and sexism (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). Trends in the sexualization of culture (Attwood, 2009) and a pornophication of the public sphere (McNair, 2002) have meant that female sexuality has been increasingly represented in more erotic and sexualized ways. Heterosexual women are increasingly depicted as *having* a sexuality that is active, desiring, and seeking sexual encounters and sexual pleasure (Evans *et al.*, 2010; Gill, 2009b). The call to being sexual, however, has almost become a *new* imperative for women who may be deemed prudish or old fashioned if they are not (always) ‘up for it’ (Gavey, 2005).

Framed within an enduring orgasmic imperative (Nicolson & Burr, 2003), women are also increasingly obligated to experience sexual pleasure (Braun *et al.*, 2003). This requirement of female sexual desire and pleasure has supported an increase in the medicalization of female sexuality, where low sex drive is pathologized (Tiefer, 2003), and vaginal cosmetic surgery, which promises to increase

sexual pleasure for women, is on the rise (Braun, 2009). Evidently, female sexuality has become big business (Tiefer, 2008), is increasingly tied to consumption (Gill, 2009b), and is still overwhelmingly governed by heteronormative ideals (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2008). There are, of course, many who are absent from these discourses, which tend to apply to white, heterosexual, able-bodied, slim, and middle-class women (Tepper, 2000).

Within this context, the way female sexuality is represented in the media has shifted quite significantly. For example, women's (heterosexual) casual sex has been openly and directly presented in television shows (e.g. *Sex and the City*), feature films (e.g. *No Strings Attached*, *Friends with Benefits*) and in a plethora of online/in print magazine and news articles (Farvid & Braun, 2013a, 2013b). Women's participation in casual sex has become newsworthy (Shadwell, 2011) and a topic for academic research (e.g. Armstrong *et al.*, 2010; Beres & Farvid, 2010; Farvid, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2013a, 2013b). Casual sex is typically defined as any form of sexual congress between two (ostensibly) single and 'consenting' individuals who are not in a committed relationship with each other (Farvid, 2011).¹ Although the roots of contemporary heterosexual casual sex can be traced to much earlier historic maneuvers (see Farvid, 2012), the ideology of 'free love' during the 1960s and 1970s (along with the cultivation of a 'singles scene', the introduction of the contraceptive pill, and women's liberation movements), has meant that casual sex has become a more visible part of contemporary female heterosexuality (Farvid, 2012). Situated within a 'permissive discourse' (Hollway, 1989), both men *and* women are positioned as desiring sexual agents with the right to (casual) sex and sexual pleasures. However, based on an enduring sexual double standard (Crawford & Popp, 2003), women's casual sex is still fraught with moral unease and cultural contradictions in which women are encouraged to be more active in their sexuality, but still need to manage the fine line between being deemed sexually liberated and 'slutty' (Beres & Farvid, 2010). In casual sex advice literature, for example, women are invited to embody a sassy and desiring sexual subjectivity, whilst simultaneously being positioned as less sexually desiring than men and at more ubiquitous physical/emotional risk (Farvid & Braun, 2013a, 2013b).

Traditionally, casual sex has sat outside the 'charmed circle' of heteronormative practice (Rubin, 1984), and women's engagement within it could be celebrated as transgressive of traditional femininity and female sexuality. Given the complicated and contradictory ways in which female heterosexuality is constructed and plays out within the contemporary cultural context, how do we make sense of female sexual desire and pleasure in relation to something like heterosexual casual sex? Is this a context that lends itself to women resisting conventional notions of womanhood and reworking some of the associated truisms of female sexuality? Or are women still constrained by dominant heteronormative discourses? This chapter uses data from a feminist social constructionist project examining young women's experiences of heterosexual casual sex to demonstrate moments of resistance and the contradictions and constraints implicated in the talk. The

analysis demonstrates how the women reworked some traditional constructions when it came to female sexual desire, whilst being constrained in their articulations of pleasurable sexual experiences.

Methodology

This study involved semi-structured interviews with 15 women aged 19–25 years, who responded to advertisements for heterosexual women to take part in a study on their experiences of 'casual sex'. As discussed in detail elsewhere (Farvid, 2010), this study attracted a pool of rather unique participants who self-identified as engaging in casual sex and were willing to talk to a researcher about their experiences. The interview questions asked directly about casual sex and women's experiences and impressions related to various aspects of the practice. Of the 15 participants, 10 identified as Pākehā (non-Māori New Zealanders of European descent), two as Māori, one as Pākehā /Māori, one as Pākehā/Samoan, and one as Chinese. Participants indicated having had casual sex experiences, ranging from two to more than 15 encounters (with seven participants reporting having had more than 15 experiences).

The interviews were all conducted at The University of Auckland in New Zealand and ranged between 45 minutes to two hours in length (with most taking about 1.5 hours). All interviews were transcribed using an orthographic style of transcription in which all words, including laughter, long pauses, and strong emphases were transcribed verbatim. The data was analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using insights and approaches from discourse analytic methods at points, in order to enhance the analysis (Wetherell, 1998). The analysis of the data involved repeated reading of the data to identify recurrent themes and patterns of talk across the women's accounts along with contradictions and inconsistencies in how women articulated their casual sex experiences. There was an analytic interest in the discourses women drew on in constructing their narratives and the subject positions evoked when talking about their experiences of casual sex. A double layered method of analysis was applied with an interest in both what the women had to say about their experiences (i.e. their stories) and the ideas, assumptions, and discourses that informed their talk, while taking into consideration the broader social context for shaping these experiences.

Articulating sexual desire

The women talked about casual sex in positive ways, constructing it as good, fun, and as an acceptable and enjoyable practice for women. Notably, most women contrasted their current positioning with that of a previous self who had 'bought into' more traditional modes of female sexuality, saw casual sex as wrong, and associated sex only with committed relationships. At the time of the interviews, however, the women claimed that their sexual experiences and the process of becoming older had meant a change in their understandings of casual sex and their

resistance to being 'cultural dupes' who bought into traditional versions of passive and relationship-focused femininity. In comparing themselves to a previous traditional or prudish self, speakers thus defended their current positioning as more developed than their past naïve selves. In their talk, casual sex was largely depicted as recreational and as a means to fulfilling *sexual* desire:

Pani: What did it [the casual sex] mean to you?

Cathy: Um in?

Pani: Maybe in terms of feelings?

Cathy: Oh in feeling um

Pani: Or in general?

Cathy: Um nothing really it was just sort of a um tryna think of the word
(laughs)

Pani: (laughs)

Cathy: Um in the moment you know in the say in the heat of the moment it was just one of those like I wasn't really thinking about anything else it was just purely just for that ... that fulfillment (laughs)

Pani: Yeah

Cathy: Of that desire (laughs).

Cathy depicts the function of casual sex as satiating her sexual desire and nothing beyond. Across participants' accounts, the desire for casual sex was not only constructed as sex for sex's sake but was also never constructed as desire for emotional intimacy:

Pani: With all those three instances that you've explained um for each of them what would you say what was the reason for wanting to have casual sex what was your motivation or the drive?

Nicky: Um the first one, like the flatmate, was the drive he's sexy always wanted to and so suddenly the opportunity arose and it was like wow I've wanted this for a year and a half (*Pani:* laughs) hell I'm going to take it ... not at any stage did I sort of think it would turn into a long-term relationship ... the second one, the uni guy he was hot yeah he was hot (*Pani:* yeah) horny (laughs) ... so it was just a you know need to have sex oh you (*Pani:* laughs) you you're pretty sexy you'll do (laughing).

Pani: So um (pause) how did the casual sex come about this time?

Mel: Um, through, um, ah meeting him, and then, he was extremely hot and a rugby player

Pani: Yeah (laughing)

Mel: And he had the nicest hair, an' um he was *really* tall an' *really* muscly an' I dunno he was just a, he was a great guy (*Pani:* mhm) but um, yeah so I really liked him, well not well not extremely liked him I just kind've um had well it wasn't love or anything it was lust y'know I just really wanted to sleep with him.

Nicky and Mel talk of a desire for (casual) sex in terms of their physical attraction towards particular men and not for intimacy needs, love, or in pursuit of a relationship. Both these accounts risk being heard as slipping into a 'have/hold discourse' (Hollway, 1989). Nicky described having wanted to be with the man for "a year and a half" and Mel notes that the man she had sex with was "a great guy" and that she "really liked him". However, both speakers immediately reject and repair the evocation of a romantic discourse. They instead position themselves as *not* interested in relationships, and resisting dominant discourses of female sexuality as only relationally driven. The severing of a sex/love conflation (Shefer & Foster, 2001) that is traditionally associated with female sexuality is evident and provides a positive positioning for women in heterosex by expanding the sexual subjectivities available to them. Unlike discourses of traditional female sexuality in which women are passive and responsive to men's needs, research has documented that when a sexual exchange becomes just about sex it makes sexual negotiation (in terms of sexual safety and beyond) easier (Kippax *et al.*, 1990). In a romantic context, factors such as 'love' and 'trust' have been identified to impede safer sexual practices (Willig, 1997). Although casual sex is not necessarily safer than sex with a committed partner, in the casual context, initiating sexual safety measures is much more part of the sexual expectation (especially when the sex is expected to be one-off (Farvid & Braun, 2013a).

Seeking (casual) sex

Alongside an articulation of desire for casual sex, some women talked of actively pursuing casual sexual encounters:

RACHEL: It was just a bit of fun, I was you know, I wasn't just some passive little went out there in a short skirt and a guy said oh look you know I can do that and (Pani: yeah) it's not, and you don't just lay there it's, you're being active about it and you know you're actively seeking sex, and getting sex and I think it's um empowering on some levels you know.

Rachel positions herself as an active and desiring sexual subject who is not picked up but does the picking up in a casual sex scenario. Here, and in other accounts (e.g. Dani, Jo, Nicky), casual sex was reportedly sought on the women's own terms and for the sake of (ideally pleasurable) sex. In this account, Rachel frames desiring casual sex and actively seeking it as "empowering on some levels". Like Rachel, most had at one time or another reportedly instigated casual sex. Aside from destabilizing traditional gender roles within heterosex, in her initiation of (casual) sex a woman is signaling that she has a desire for sex, inviting a prospective sexual partner to recognize her desire and "accept her understanding of it" (Kippax *et al.*, 1990, p. 541).

Reasons for wanting and having (casual) sex

The women displayed a positive reframing of sexual desire as something that they possessed. This sexual desire was also talked about as directing their sexual behavior. These promising counter-stories of an active desiring sexuality signals moments of resistance to traditional modes of passive female heterosexuality. For example, in the following extract, I had asked Dani why she engages in casual sex:

DANI: You know basically you know um I've got a high sex drive, I need sex, if someone take if someone c-catches my eye I'll approach them, if they you know, if they kinda don't look that interested I I won't offer (Pani: mnhmn) but if it's you know it's if it's like oh yeah mnn I'm getting the glad-eye back, yeah sweet as, right come on over! (laughing) (Pani: mnhmn yeah) Um yeah basically just for for the sex. For the I guess the stress relief, the tension relief, if nothing else, um and for the fun!

Dani provided three reasons why she would engage in casual sex (hence, building a rhetorically robust argument around her choice to do so (Jefferson, 1990)): she has a high sex drive, sex as stress relief, and sex as fun. Dani's use of the drive discourse is particularly interesting. Although primarily associated with male sexuality (Hollway, 1989), Dani extends this to women in giving an account of her (biological) drive and *need* for sex. Situated within a broader context where biological factors are seen as one of the prime sources of sexual desires (Tiefer, 2004), and a male model of sexuality is prioritized within sociocultural and sexual discourse (Wood *et al.*, 2006), Dani frames her sex drive as dictating her desire for sex. While this accounting serves to explain her behavior, it does so in a way that marks her as an exception to the norms of femininity. In doing so, dominant forms of passive female sexuality remain unchallenged.

Like Dani, most women described themselves as liking and enjoying sex, and this was commonly the reason given for why the women engaged in casual sex:

Pani: Um so yeah why would you have casual sex?

Shelly: Um well because I like sex (laughs) ... I enjoy sex um and I've got I dunno I feel like I have a really high sex drive (mnhmn) and I talk to my sisters about it and they feel that they have really high sex drives too so we're just thinking that it runs in our family (laughs).

Laura: I'm naturally a very sexual person ... I've always really enjoyed sex.

Having a high sex drive, being sexual and enjoying sex were provided as justifications for engaging in casual sex. Casual sex as fun and enjoyable sat alongside a more biological explanation for desiring casual sex. These accounts construct casual sex as an experience that women enjoy, but potentially function to exonerate

the personal responsibility for the desire or need for sex by shifting the focus to natural (biological) sources. Invoking a biological need for sex frames this desire as inherent and as pre-existing (Tiefer, 2004). Thus, here, women were acting outside social feminine norms, but this was framed as not *chosen*, but rather as just the way the women naturally were. Desiring sex was also framed as not only natural but also as healthy:

Cathy: Um so yeah I guess that [sexual reputation] would concern me but um I haven't really thought about it I mean I think it's healthy (laughs)

Pani: Um what sorry?

Cathy: (Overlapping) sexu-like my sexualness is (mhm mhm) pretty healthy like um but yeah I'm not like a nymphomaniac or anything like that (laughs).

As a response to a questioning about getting a sexual reputation, Cathy positions her sexual desire as "healthy" and distinguishing it from "nymphomania". Here, Cathy's account suggests that there are negative social connotations of being deemed pathologically sexual if women want and have what is considered too much casual sex, but that her sexuality is 'normal' and healthy. This account suggests there are boundaries around that which is considered an appropriate amount of casual sex for women. Having some casual sex was framed as good within the women's accounts, and largely acceptable, whereas too much was constructed as pathological and unhealthy.

The women talked of a desire for casual sex and reported agency around wanting casual sex. However the articulation of desire was managed in a way that did not necessarily disrupt traditional discourses of passive female sexuality. When representing themselves as sexually desiring individuals, speakers often identified themselves as *unusually* driven for sex (as women). By presenting themselves as exceptions (e.g. "very sexual", "a high sex drive"), dominant discourses of women's passive sexuality went uninterrupted. The speakers defended their desire, whilst positioning themselves as oddly (highly) sexual.

Furthermore, as signaled above, the invoking of the drive discourse (typically associated with male sexuality) and applying it to female sexuality (Wood *et al.*, 2006) needs some critical consideration. Although demonstrating moments of resistance, the wider issue with merely borrowing from such a model is that it is firmly entrenched in dominant models of masculinity and heterosexuality, and hence fails to rework the current gender order. As Holland and her colleagues (1998) have noted, "women must not only resist conventional femininity, but also disrupt hegemonic masculinity and the gender relations of heterosexuality" (p. 119). Thus, in these women's accounts, the extension of a male sex drive discourse to women is not a full reworking of traditional female sexuality.

While a drive discourse provides women with an existing discourse to draw on in order to account for their desire, it promotes an individualistic and essentialist

version of (traditionally masculine) sexuality, where drives and hormones become the source of one's sexual desire and the influence of the social and cultural contexts for producing such possibilities are largely erased. So although a drive discourse might be a useful tool for women to articulate an acceptable form of sexual desire (Wood *et al.*, 2006), it may be less useful toward feminist goals of resisting dominant discourses of heterosexuality and opening up plural forms of sexual understanding.

The missing discourse of pleasure

Although the women interviewed could articulate a desire for (casual) sex, talk about casual sex as stress relief or as fun, they generally seemed to have great difficulty in responding to questions geared towards sexual pleasure. In contrast, women were able to give detailed accounts of negative experiences within the context of casual sex with minimal probing. While casual sex was generally depicted as good and fun, most women reported at least one negative experience of casual sex. Reports of negative or coercive experiences, even from women who seemed sexually confident and had many positive casual experiences, highlight ongoing power imbalances within heterosexuals (Gavey, 2005). Negative accounts were often very long and detailed, indicating the prevalence of readily available, and easily accessible, discourses associated with the *negative* aspects of heterosexuals for women. It seems that heterosexuals is still (and often rightly so) discursively constructed as a 'danger zone' for women, where pleasure and danger remain simultaneously implicated within the practice (Vance, 1984).

In contrast to participants' lengthy discussions of negative experiences, when they were asked if a particular casual sex experience was pleasurable, they often responded with a swift "yes" and were much less forthcoming in their discussion of what pleasure entailed. When initially asked "how and/or in what way a particular experience was pleasurable", participants appeared to be caught off-guard as though they had never been asked that question before, or did not know *how* to answer:

Pani: Mhmm and was it sexually pleasurable?
 Cathy: Yes it was very sexually pleasurable (laughing) yeah (laughing)
 Pani: Cool
 Cathy: Very much so (laughs)
 Pani: Um and how and in what way? (laughs)
 Cathy: Um and how and in what way?
 Pani: Yeah (laughs)
 Cathy: Um
 Pani: What were the things that were sexually pleasurable about it?
 Cathy: Ah the feelings that go with sex I guess, um like the the leading up to it and the just the processes of it all (Pani: mhm), and then then when like when you're finally h-having sex doing the deed and sorta you sorta

get to know each other and how each other like things and stuff. And he was really really good and really attentive and he really knew how to push (laughing) my buttons (laughing) I guess (Pani: laughs).

Cathy initially demonstrates difficulty in answering what was pleasurable about her sexual encounter, but then goes on to vaguely describe its pleasurable components after significant probing. It is particularly difficult to pinpoint what it was *per se* that she found pleasurable. For example, aside from constructing sex as “mechanistic and technical” (Gilfoyle *et al.*, 1992, p. 222), what does pushing the right buttons mean for her? What were the practices that produced this pleasure? In addition, this pleasure was reportedly not all physically located (e.g., “the leading up to it”), and the man’s reported attentiveness is implicated in Cathy’s account of sexual pleasure.

The physicality of sexual pleasure

In a cultural context where representations of sex/uality abound, there seems to be “a lack of everyday discussion of ‘doing’ sex and particularly of sexual pleasure” (Jackson & Scott, 2007, p. 108). The women had great difficulty in not only talking about sexual pleasure, but in describing what made sex *physically* pleasurable:

Pani: In what way was it sexually pleasurable?

Alex: Oh it was good sex! (laughs)

Pani: Yeah

Alex: Yeah (laughs)

Pani: Which um if I could just get you to define (laughs)

Alex: (laughs)

Pani: What was good about it? Like?

Alex: Um how do I define it? (laughing)

Pani: Um what were the particulars that made it good? Kind of difficult (Alex: um) of course if you feel comfortable saying (laughs)

Alex: Yeah well I felt I felt comfortable with it and it was comfortable and yeah just a (laughs) um I don’t know how to explain that

Pani: Sure, were there any specific sexual practices that made it sexually pleasurable

Alex: Um (pause) ah well it’s it’s not as if we did any out of the ordinary positions or anything (laughing) but

Pani: (laughs)

Alex: Yeah the uh I don’t know it just worked for us (laughs).

Alex’s initial response “oh it was good sex” is offered up as an explanation for how the sex was pleasurable. Despite some persistent (and uncomfortable)

probing, she does not articulate what made the sex good or pleasurable beyond “it just worked for us”. Here, sexually pleasurable (casual) sex is simply referred to as “good sex”, as though there is a common (taken-for-granted) understanding of what that means. This difficulty in unpacking or explaining what constitutes good sex signals a lack of discursive recourses available for women to articulate sexual pleasure (and a general difficulty of talking about this topic openly in our culture). Furthermore, the function of laughter in these extracts needs some analytic attention. In talk about pleasure, the women and I both exhibit repeated instances of laughter. In a conversational setting, laughter both shows and produces affiliation and is useful in moments of discomfort, anxiety or embarrassment (Glenn, 2003). In the extracts above, laughter can be seen as a marker of conversational trouble spots further signaling the difficulty and unease that talk of sexual pleasure produced in the interview context.

Not only was it difficult for the women to articulate pleasure, most seemed unwilling or unable to directly talk about what (if any) sexual practices were pleasurable for them, even when directly asked:

Pani: Um d’you feel comfortable telling me what you would ask them, like what is the

Jane: Ahh (laughing)

Pani: You don’t have to

Jane: Yeah

Pani: (Overlapping) only jus’ ’cos it’s um, really difficult to know what we’re actually talking about (laughing)

Jane: Oh y’know like stuff that girls like (laughing) yeah

Pani: So maybe oral sex for women?

Jane: Yeah.

In this account Jane resists naming the practices she finds enjoyable during sex. By describing it only as “stuff that girls like”, she constructs female sexual pleasure and what girls like as general knowledge within culture, but also as difficult to talk about with an interviewer within the context of casual sex research. Even women who were eager to share their casual sexual experiences did not initiate talk in the interviews about sexual pleasure or pleasurable sexual practices within casual sex. Some women seemed less forthcoming with talking about this (particularly when initially asked questions of this kind), without probing from me, the interviewer. Others were more forthcoming, but still seemed unprepared when asked what made the sex pleasurable *per se*. After I explained what I meant, most women responded with more ease. Like foreplay in the often-cited linear progression of heterosex (Jackson & Scott, 2001), I had to warm up the participants in order to have them talk about their experiences of sexual pleasure. This warming up is a common feature of talk within the context of (casual) sex research (Farvid, 2011).

Non-coital pleasures

When talk focused on the sexual practices women found pleasurable in casual sex, the women who responded more openly indicated that they enjoyed cunnilingus:

Pani: So that time was sexually pleasurable?

Rachel: Definitely

Pani: Yeah

Rachel: He was brilliant

Pani: Yeah

Rachel: I was stoked (laughs) I boasted to everyone I knew (laughing)

Pani: (laughs) um so what made it good? (laughs)

Rachel: Um he just knew you know he knew which um buttons to push he knew in general what girls like he wasn't just um, some guys just stick it in try and stick it in and which is not appreciated at all (laughs) um but yeah and he gave good head (*Pani:* laughs) which is always important!

Like Jane's extract in the previous section, Rachel also refers to practices that are ostensibly sexually pleasurable for women as "what girls like". Good (casual) sex is again framed in mechanical terms as pushing the right buttons (Gilfoyle *et al.*, 1992). This was often used as a metaphor for describing a man who was good at pleasuring a woman sexually. In many of the interviews, pleasurable sex was something that the women were given based on the men's skills and 'sexpertise' (Potts, 2002), rather than something that they produced themselves or garnered via mutual negotiation. Hence, some women subtly occupied a passive sexual subjectivity when it came to pleasure in casual sex.

Within the women's accounts, sex was often synonymous with vagina/penis intercourse and imbedded in a 'coital imperative' (McPhillips *et al.*, 2001). However, coitus alone was not depicted as enough to satisfy women's sexual pleasure needs (see also Gavey *et al.*, 1999; Holland *et al.*, 1998) and was at times referred to in negative ways. Coitus alone was constructed as either boring or too much about the man's experience:

Jane: I always think girls get a really raw deal when it comes to sex, because it's sort of, it's so based on like a man's experience sort of thing, like it's like y'know you have sex but you stop when the man comes y'know, it's and then like s-some guys know, y'know? That's not like it's not just finishing there sorta thing (laughs), but like lots of guys don't and lots of girls don't either, it's like and they think y'know what am I doing here? What's the point sort of thing?

By constructing phallogentric sex (Potts, 2002) as unfair and pointless, Jane problematizes a conventional model of linear heterosexual (as vagina/penis intercourse ending with male orgasm (Jackson & Scott, 2001, 2007). Hence, the coital

imperative was directly challenged, and vagina/penis intercourse *alone* was positioned as insufficient to satisfy women's pleasure, particularly in terms of orgasm:

Pani: What do you mean with um when you said sex doesn't happen naturally?

Rachel: Oh like um well, I mean I s- I s'pose there is some sort of instinctual thing about sex but to have sex that's really good to have sex that's not just mediocre I mean I've never had a vaginal orgasm, so just sex just penis and vaginal sex isn't gonna do it for me, I'm not interested in that alone. So um it's important that a guy you know knows where a clitoris is, um and you know, just it I s'pose it's an experience thing, a lot of it knowing um not to be too rough and then sort of um paying attention to the other person's body language and signals.

Here pleasurable sex was framed as something that required male 'sexpertise' (Potts, 2002). In Rachel's account, a familiar distinction is made between clitoral and vaginal orgasm (Opperman *et al.*, in press).² There was an underlying assumption within the accounts that a vaginal orgasm was produced by a penetrating penis, whereas a clitoral orgasm was produced by oral, digital or other forms of stimulation (Opperman *et al.*, in press). Penetrative sex as leading to orgasm (even via clitoris stimulation) was never mentioned by Rachel or any other interviewee. There were hence two distinct forms of orgasm identified and not all women talked of having vaginal orgasms, but most talked of having clitoral ones. A man who was sexually experienced was constructed as desirable in terms of his sexual technique, beyond coitus. The clitoris was highlighted as a pleasure point for women, basic male sexuality was constructed as not clitoris-focused, and vaginal intercourse was subtly framed as basic, unlearned and inexperienced male sexuality (Kilmartin, 1999). Previous research has noted that women report cunnilingus as more, or at least as, pleasurable as vagina/penis intercourse (Gavey *et al.*, 1999), and this was also reported as one of the most pleasurable parts of sex here. In moments of resistance, women's accounts highlighted how a phallocentric model of sexuality (Potts, 2002), alone, was inadequate in meeting their pleasure needs and desires.

In talk about pleasure, orgasm was offered as one of the main pleasurable aspects of a sexual encounter:

Pani: And what would you say ... for you, is the most pleasurable part of sex or with him? Maybe even -

Cathy: With him um probably yeah it's it making it feel the experience of an orgasm I love it it's such a cool feeling.

Pani: And what did it [casual sex] mean to you that first time?

Shelly: Um it meant a really good orgasm! (laughs)

Pani: Okay (laughing)

Shelly: Yeah yeah that's pretty much like he just like yeah he was um the first guy to give me an orgasm a pro- like a pro (laughs) yeah

Situated within a cultural context where an orgasm is constructed as the endpoint and highpoint of sex (Jackson & Scott, 2001), pleasurable casual sex, when discussed, was often talked about in terms of having an orgasm (Opperman *et al.*, in press). The occurrence of an orgasm during casual sex was not talked about as a frequent occurrence (Armstrong *et al.*, 2009; Opperman *et al.*, in press). Hence, if an orgasm occurred, it elevated the sexual experience to being very positive as it was not generally expected. In contrast to men's casual sex reports (Heldman & Wade, 2010), the base-line of casual sex for women was not sex that automatically involved an orgasm. This orgasm inequality in casual sex has been discussed elsewhere (Armstrong *et al.*, 2009) and is an important aspect of sexual pleasure and egalitarianism to consider. What should be avoided, however, is an automatic conflation of orgasm (only) *with* sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure comes in many forms and in the interest of promoting plural sexual pleasures (that are not always genital focused), orgasm should not be taken as the (only) signifier that sexual pleasure has taken place.

One of the women elaborated much more about pleasure in casual sex, describing it in less mechanistic terms:

Pani: What do you mean with knowing how to pleasure a woman then?

Rachel: Um like um knowing that going straight for the genitals is not really the best thing (both laugh) to do um (laughing) (Pani: mhm) you know, making it more of a whole body experience rather than just the whole yeah penis and vagina (Pani: mn) I mean knowing there's a lot more to the act of sex than just that (Pani: okay) you know, the um touch and skin and um yeah things like that vocalizing, just other things all the other things that you don't actually have to have to have sex but they make sex like more they make it much better more like real sex (both laugh) not just you know nature documentary sex.

Rachel describes pleasure in terms of a myriad of sensual practices within a casual sex setting that are not necessarily genitalia focused. This account positions what women find pleasurable in sex differently to what men might desire (Nicolson & Burr, 2003), with male sexuality positioned as coitally focused. Straight vagina/penis sex is devalued as animalistic, unsophisticated and not "real sex" (which involves a host of sensual experiences beyond coitus). In a further moment of resistance, Rachel then went on to discuss how she approaches negotiating pleasurable sex:

Pani: Do you explicitly tell guys what to do or do you sort of how do you go about?

Rachel: Um I do sometimes, it depends if they're not getting the hint. I won't do it straight away, I mean some guys that are experienced and they know what to do they've got a fairly good idea, otherwise I'll just um like vocalize about things or move my body away if you like something yeah

sort of make a few you know happy noises (both laughing) and um m-move your body towards him if you don't like it you move it away and just sort of try and direct them into doing something else maybe like moving their hands or something.

Rachel (like Cathy before) framed a sexually experienced man in positive terms always leading to better sexual performance (and a better sexual encounter for the woman). The increased cultural attention to sex and sexual pleasure has also resulted in the increased attention to sexual skill and technique (Seidman, 1991). Here, technique and performance are constructed in generic terms and men's sexual experience, in general, is framed as always good. Rachel also reports strategic ways in which she directs casual sex partners in pleasuring her sexually using verbal and bodily communication. The agency she embodies here in negotiating sex is a positive framing of contemporary female sexuality. At least for this woman, she was reworking the passive and responsive ideals of traditional femininity and reported applying direct and indirect communicative strategies to negotiate more positive and pleasurable sexual encounters.

Implications for scholarship, public education, and policy development

Women interviewed for this study could clearly articulate a desire for casual sex and some described actively pursuing such encounters. The analysis demonstrated that accounts of female (hetero)sexuality may no longer be typified by a discourse of missing desire (Fine, 1988) or whispered expressions of these (Holland *et al.*, 1998). Even if framed within a drive discourse, the women clearly engaged in moments of resistance when they provided counter-narratives of a desirous female sexuality. The articulation of a drive discourse may also have much to do with the research being explicitly about 'casual sex', inviting women to provide stories imbedded in a popular drive discourse associated with male sexuality and casual sex (Farvid, 2010). What seemed more elusive, however, is an unfettered discussion of women's sexual pleasure in the casual sex context. Participants were much more constrained when talking about sexual pleasure. This difficulty highlights an ongoing lack of available cultural discourses for women to frame and talk about female (hetero)sexuality and sexual pleasure (Crawford *et al.*, 1994). Talking about sexual pleasure is undoubtedly a hard task, but an available language with which to do so could provide women with the ability to build a more knowledgeable and powerful sexual subjectivity (Hollway, 1995).

Based on this research, I make several recommendations for future scholarship, sexual education and policy development. Women need more knowledge in the area of sexuality. This needs to come both in a public educational form and personal experiential manner, what has been termed 'intellectual empowerment' and 'experiential empowerment' (Holland *et al.*, 1998). The women I interviewed reworked traditional ideals of sexuality instilled in them early on, by having

various sexual experiences outside the context of a committed and longer-term relationship. By becoming more sexually experienced, they were able to rework the supposed rules of feminine heterosexuality and negotiate alternative ways of being sexual subjects. Innovative research further examining women's accounts of sexual desire and sexual pleasure is required if we are to expand the vocabularies of heterosex for heterosexual women (see Farvid, 2010). Older women could initially be the prime focus of this research, as based on their life/sexual experiences they may have more to offer in terms of their understandings, negotiations and descriptions of sexual desire and sexual pleasure across various relational contexts. Sexual education in schools needs to focus on incorporating a discourse of ethical erotics within the curriculum whereby young women are provided with a reflexive, desirous, physical, and pleasure-aware sexual subjectivity (see Allen, 2005; Carmody, 2009). Sexual health policy makers too need to include discussions of desire and pleasure as central to framing sexuality across the lifespan. In higher educational settings, discussions of sexual desire and pleasure should be a core component of curriculum for health-care professionals working across different modalities and contexts (e.g. nursing, aged care, palliative care, clinical, or therapeutic training), as this component of health is often neglected.

In all spheres of future application, what needs to be avoided is co-opting the dominant, essentialist, drive discourse (typically associated with male sexuality in sexological discourse and beyond), in order to explain and justify female sexual desire and sexual pleasure (Tiefer, 2003; Wood *et al.*, 2006). Rather, what is urgently needed is a reconceptualization of the drive discourse and the cultivation of alternative discourses when it comes to female sexual desire. We need more space to explore women's understandings and experiences of the pleasures associated with heterosex. A social constructionist view of sexuality asserts that we are not born with an internal biological drive that dictates our preference for certain ways of being sexual (Tiefer, 2004); rather we constantly (re)build our sexual selves based on the social, cultural, historic milieu within which we find ourselves and the dominant (and alternative) discourses of sexuality available to us at any given moment. This approach is useful for destabilizing dominant biomedical and sexological discourses of sex, providing room for (re)workings of traditional heterosexuality. Sexuality needs to be (re)conceptualized in popular discourse, in an anti-essentialist manner, as fluid, malleable, contextual, situational, unbound by gender, and variable across the lifespan. This reframing allows the inclusion of various bodies, sexualities, and pleasures beyond heteronormative dichotomies. As discourse and practice are inextricably intertwined, challenging the rigid rules and truths of heterosexuality needs to occur concurrently with the cultivation of plural, diverse, and inclusive ways of being sexual that move beyond the current gendered constructs.

Female heterosexuality needs to be discussed and represented much more often and in ways that challenge conventional heteronormativity. Women need to be able to embrace various ways of talking about sex, desire, and pleasure. Discourses of sex as fun, enjoyable, and good stress relief are useful and can

challenge, but they also sit alongside the more conventional discourse of sex as intimacy. When it comes to desire, women could own their sexuality more firmly and not explain their desire away by constructing it as 'just how they are' biologically (and thus unusual and unlike other women). A more reflexive approach to sex and sexuality could be useful here. Reflecting on sexual experiences and thinking through one's desires, the desires of others, what is enjoyable and what is not during sex (and why this might be) would allow women to articulate a more considered and deliberate sexuality (Beres & Farvid, 2010). Heterosexual women could be invited to strive for a version of sexuality that one actively constructs, rather than merely acts out in a non-reflexive manner. When it comes to pleasure, women need the cultural space to discuss the physicality of sexual pleasure and its affective experience. What does good sex feel like? What does it involve? Why is this pleasurable? Can pleasure be more than just orgasmic? Such discussions of sex, desire, and pleasure may already occur among close friends but need to be circulated more broadly via feminist media interventions (films, magazines, blogs), art exhibitions, and consciousness-raising exercises (that are already occurring). Female heterosexuality is shifting within western culture and feminists need to be actively engaged in this reconstruction, in an effort to avoid sexist formulations prevailing.

Endnotes

- 1 Consent is a murky concept in heterosex, marred by unequal (gendered) power relations (Gavey, 2005) and needs to be treated with caution when describing casual sex.
- 2 This often cited division is a controversial topic as some argue that the location of women's orgasms is the clitoris (and only the clitoris: Hite, 2004) and the vaginal orgasm was a creation (or requirement) that suits a phallogentric and coital form of sexuality that is more suited to male sexuality (Koedt, 1996). Sexologists such as Freud and Kinsey are often accused of downplaying the clitoris in favor of vaginal forms of sex and pleasure (Hite, 2004).

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