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“I’d be just as happy with a cup of tea”: Women’s accounts of sex and affection in long-term heterosexual relationships

Abstract

This article reports a feminist analysis of interview data with 10 British women, in which they discuss sex and affection in their heterosexual relationships. We explore the popular cultural notion that women lack sexual desire and are more concerned with love and affection. Feminist research has highlighted how in mainstream cultural discourses, men’s sexuality has been positioned as superior to women’s. Women’s (lack of) desire is viewed as problematic and men’s (active) ‘need’ for sex contrasts sharply with the construction of women as (passive) recipients of men’s desire. The women in this research reported a lack of sexual desire, but positioned themselves as wanting to want sex, or ‘desiring desire’. They expected penis-in-vagina intercourse to be an inherent part of (hetero)sex, and some participated in unwanted (consensual) sex in order to satisfy what they perceived as men’s inherent ‘need’ for sex. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for feminist research and practice.

Keywords: coital imperative, sexual desire, (hetero)sex, heterosexuality, sexuality research, thematic analysis
“I’d be just as happy with a cup of tea”: Women’s accounts of sex and affection in long-term heterosexual relationships

Introduction

This research presents a qualitative feminist analysis of women’s talk about sex and affection in the context of long-term¹ heterosexual² relationships. While (hetero)sexuality cannot be reduced to sexual practice alone, nonetheless sexual practices are often understood as a key aspect of understanding and interpreting heterosexual identities (Hockey, Meah & Robinson, 2007).

Within Western culture the notion that men want sex, while women want love, has widespread currency. Such conceptualisations of men’s and women’s sexuality are underpinned by mainstream discourses of heterosexuality, within a hegemonic and heteronormative framework. Hollway (1989) introduced the notion of a ‘male sexual drive discourse’ in which men are positioned as possessing an inherent and ‘insatiable’ sex drive and where sex is constructed as both ‘natural’ and necessary. In contrast to the portrayal of men as possessing an inherent need for sex, women have often been portrayed as having little or no desire (Fine, 1988; Hollway, 1989), and are instead represented as wanting ‘to be loved or cherished’ (Braun, Gavey & McPhillips, 2003:238). Many (heterosexual) women are reported to idealise intercourse and to want sex to be about emotions, with an emphasis on romance (see, for example, Hite, 1976/2004; Jackson, 2005:296). Furthermore, mainstream discourses of sex reduce ‘real’ sex to ‘penis-in-vagina’ intercourse (Richardson, 1996:278). There is a ‘coital imperative’ where it is ‘taken for granted that intercourse is an inherent part of heterosex’ (McPhillips, Braun & Gavey, 2001:238-
239), despite it not necessarily being the most pleasurable act for many heterosexual
women (e.g., Hite, 1976/2004; Bancroft, 2002). Lowe (2005) concisely summarises
Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson’s (1998) observations that mainstream
culture dictates that for women ‘heterosex is supposed to be an emotional, intense,
and escalating experience, ending with vaginal intercourse and male ejaculation’
(p.80).

Within traditional mainstream understandings, women’s desires are portrayed as at
worst absent, or at best, passive. If women are ever represented as possessing sexual
agency then this is often interpreted as the result of women’s ‘need’ to reproduce
(Oakley, 1980; Hollway, 1989). This necessity to reproduce has also been referred to
as an imperative (e.g., Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000; Glazer, 2001). The ‘motherhood’ or
‘birth’ imperative prescriptively locates women as unfulfilled until they become
mothers, also rendering deficient those women who choose to remain childfree (e.g.,
Morell, 2000) (and ‘marriage’ and ‘the (nuclear) family’ uphold the taken-for-granted
hegemonic status of heterosexuality, see, for example, Hockey et al., 2007).

Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005:16-17) theorise a ‘missing discourse of
ambivalence’, whereby women may want the outcomes of sexual activity such as
‘intimacy, satisfying partner’s needs and avoiding relationship tension’ (in addition to
children) but not necessarily the (hetero)sex itself. Subsequently in mainstream
cultural discourses men’s and women’s sexuality often becomes dichotomous: men’s
desire is active; men initiate, seek out, and want sex, and women’s desire is passive;
their interest in sex is related to the outcomes of sex rather than to the sex itself.
These ‘traditional’ mainstream cultural discourses are unhelpful in a number of ways, presenting women’s ‘lack of desire’ as problematic rather than positioning men’s ‘excessive desire’ as a problem. Furthermore, mainstream discourses of sexuality serve to prioritise men’s pleasure. This leads to a diminishing of the importance of women’s enjoyment of (hetero)sex and sexual activities. Consequently there is a clear hierarchy regarding whose pleasure is important within (hetero)sex: men are positioned as not only ‘needing’ sex, but also ‘deserving’ pleasure, whereas women’s pleasure is of little or no importance. This has been recognised and termed a ‘double standard’ that ‘subordinate[s] women’s sexuality to that of men’ (Jackson & Cram, 2003:115; see also Hite, 1976/2004).

These prescriptive discourses contribute to the reinforcement of ‘the dominant cultural narratives of dualism, male hegemony and heteronormativity’ (Myerson, Crawley, Anstey, Kessler & Okopny, 2007:95). It is important to briefly note the ways in which discourses of masculinity underpin the dichotomous framing of masculinity and femininity. Just as traditional notions of women and femininity position women’s sexuality as secondary to men’s, so traditional notions of men and masculinity reinforce this position and frame men’s sexuality as of primary importance. They do this by prescribing and regulating ‘masculinity’ within powerful hegemonic ideologies which maintain the subordination of women (see, for example, Wetherall & Edley, 1999; Terry & Braun, 2009). Despite this, rather than considering men demanding, women have been reported to justify men’s behaviour by making positive comparisons ‘between their own husbands (or partners) and other people’s’ (Dryden, 1999:45). This could be a reflection of the complexity of masculinities, which allows
men in heterosexual relationships to both comply with and simultaneously resist ‘traditional’ notions, resulting in men engaging with different ‘versions’ of masculinity (e.g., Allen, 2007; Hockey et al., 2007; Terry & Braun, 2009). One such version theorised in an interview study of New Zealand heterosexual men, is that of the ‘enlightened man’, who through his heterosexual relationship is able to distance himself from his ‘immature’ pre-relationship self. The ‘immature’ (past) version of themselves that these men drew on are framed as highly focused on penetrative sex for their own pleasure, independent of love or relationships, in order to prove their masculinity. The men recognised that this meant treating women as objects. However, in their ‘enlightened’ (present) version of ‘mature’ masculinity the men saw sex as embedded within love and relationships, as one participant states ‘an ingredient to make up the cake of the relationship’ (Terry & Braun, 2009:171). With this in mind, men’s understandings of masculinity may be complex and constantly changing, and it is possible that women make positive comparisons which reflect their male partners’ embodiment (or display) of ‘mature’ masculinity.

Similarly, understandings of women’s sexuality have changed, and continue to change (see, for example, Hockey et al., 2007). Sieg has highlighted that ‘in the 21st century, young women’s sexualities are often portrayed as liberated and empowered’ (2007:175). This may be in part due to a rise since the 1990s onwards of the ‘ladette’ – defined as ‘girls or women who behave in ‘laddish’ or ‘boyish’ ways’ (Jackson, 2006:343). Despite critical portrayal of ladette culture, there has been speculation that perhaps the ladette is ‘taking space once regarded the principal or sole preserve of men’ (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007:254). While Jackson and Tinkler here
refer to literal space, this could be extended to consider the more metaphorical space ‘between the sheets’. Ladette culture is argued to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and encourage young (heterosexual) women to not only talk more openly about sex, but also to engage in sexual behaviour with less restraint (Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007) and without fear of ‘moral judgement’. However, little research has explored the implications of the rise of ladette culture (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007) for women’s lived realities, so it is unclear whether these ‘new’ discourses of both femininity and masculinity have produced changes in women’s experience of sexual desire, sexual activity and sexual pleasure.

Most recently, feminist research has explored specific aspects of (hetero)sex such as portrayals of men’s ‘insatiable desires’ in women’s magazines (e.g., Farvid & Braun, 2006), and sexual consent (e.g., Gavey, 1992; Walker, 1997; Tyler, 2009). Researchers have also critiqued relationship advice literature and self help books (e.g., Potts, 1998; Boynton, 2003; Tyler, 2008), arguing that there is a tendency for biological discourses of sex to dominate within this style of literature (Tyler, 2008) and for (so called) ‘experts’ to prescribe ‘a version of relationships that most (feminist) psychologists wouldn’t necessarily endorse’ (Boynton, 2003:237).

However, there has been less focus on speaking to women about their own experiences regarding (hetero)sex and relationships. The picture that emerges from the small body of existing research is one of complexity. Some recent research indicates that more ‘traditional’ discourses of male and female sexuality and desire still predominate. Sieg (2007) spoke with young English heterosexual women aged between sixteen and twenty-five about their experiences of sexuality and
relationships, finding these women were disappointed and dissatisfied with their relationships, ‘struggling against inequalities, disadvantage and limited relational and sexual choices’ (p.183). In similar earlier research she found that some young Welsh heterosexual women felt that their boyfriends wanted more sex than they did. The women considered it inappropriate to instigate sex themselves, instead leaving this to their boyfriends, thereby, sticking ‘fairly closely to what traditional gender stereotypes would teach them’ (Sieg, 2000:501).

Bancroft, Loftus and Long (2003) conducted research based on telephone interviews, which indicated that U.S. women in heterosexual relationships felt distress around sex. This was in part due to a number of sexual ‘problems’ that the women felt they ‘suffered’ from, which ranged from lack of interest in (and minimal response to) sexual activity such as genital touching, and pain during penis-in-vagina intercourse, indicating that they received minimal pleasure from (hetero)sex.

Other research suggests that a cultural shift may be evident that disrupts the expectation that men want sex, while women want love. Allen’s interview research with young New Zealand women indicated that any suggestion that ‘young women want only love from relationships … is outdated’ and that ‘traditional notions of passive female and active male (hetero)sexuality’ are too simplistic and do not capture the contemporary nuances of heterosexual relationships (2003a:231).

Meanwhile, young New Zealand women in Jackson and Cram’s (2003) research critically discussed the sexual double standard. They described how definitions such as ‘stud’ were used to positively describe sexually active boys, whereas negative terms such as ‘slag’ were in use for sexually active girls, and they challenged terms
they considered unfair. They positioned themselves as having sexual desire, but were aware of demands brought about in ‘negotiating the confusion of sexual pressures, expectations and desires’ (Jackson & Cram, 2003:121). This led the authors to conclude that while the women were knowledgeable and agentic (rather than passive), their conceptualisations of sex were underpinned by multiple and contradictory discourses and uncertainties.

Finally, Hockey et al. (2007) conducted focus groups and interviews with over seventy U.K. heterosexual participants across three generations. The authors broadly discussed matters of sex, sexuality and relationships, masculinity and femininity, and families, with men and women. Responses varied in relation to how willing participants were to talk about sex, how much pleasure they experienced, and so on. The researchers argue that matters of heterosexuality are not static or monolithic, and highlight the multiplicity of ever changing heterosexualities (Hockey et al., 2007).

There is a need for further unravelling of the complexity of women’s experiences of sexuality and the implications of the cultural discourses which have already been identified. Exploring women’s conceptualisations of (hetero)sex can contribute further to understanding the nuances of women’s lived realities, particularly in the domain of sexuality. The ‘traditional’ notions of men’s and women’s desire and sexuality that we have highlighted, work in the service of a ‘patriarchal ideology’ (Myerson et al., 2007:94). Drawing attention to these commonly held notions offers the potential to carve a space in which women are able to question and challenge these discourses of sexuality. Further, it has been noted that feminists would do well to move beyond monolithic accounts which focus on heterosexual sex as purely
oppression, and to avoid assuming that women are, or ever have been, ‘cultural
dupes’. Instead, there is a need to instead recognise ‘the diversity of
heterosexualities which women and men inhabit; and the agency of women (and
men) within institutionalised heterosexuality’ (Hockey et al., 2007:33). To undertake
empirical research is one way in which the diversity of women’s experiences can
potentially be recognised.

Furthermore, the term ‘Western Culture’ often assumes homogeneity of participants,
where differences in particular countries may be overlooked. While some research
which investigates women and (hetero)sex has taken place within psychology and
sociology in a U.K. context (e.g., Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Sieg, 2007; Hockey et al.,
2007) much existing research has often been New Zealand (e.g., Jackson & Cram,
2003; Allen, 2003a, 2003b) and U.S. based (e.g., Bancroft et al., 2003). Hence the
interview data presented here, gathered from speaking to women about (hetero)sex,
offers a distinctly (and relatively unique) British contribution to understandings of
(hetero)sex.

The Study

Ten women were recruited through the first author’s personal contacts at university
and at work, and then through snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were that
the women were over the age of eighteen and currently in (what they defined as) a
‘long-term heterosexual relationship’ with a man. Basic demographic information
was gathered and is summarised in Table 1. All the women identified as able bodied,
eight identified as white, one as Black British and one as Black African. Nine of the
women identified as heterosexual, and one as bisexual. Five were in full-time paid
employment, one was a full-time student, and four were full-time students who were also in part-time employment. The women’s ages ranged from twenty-one to forty-three (with a mean age of twenty-eight), and the length of time in their current relationship varied from nine months to twenty seven years (with a mean of nine years)\(^1\).

Insert Table 1 about here

Interviews, conducted by the first author, took place in the participants’ homes, or in private offices in their workplaces. The semi-structured interview schedule was developed on the basis of the existing literature and our own interests in conducting this study. The participants were asked about their relationship in general terms, then eased into more probing questions around the meanings and practices of sex and affection over the duration of their life and relationship (e.g., what sex education they received, what their definitions of sex and affection were, who initiated sex in their relationship and how often they thought about sex and talked about sex with their partner and their friends). Participants chose their own pseudonyms. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines. Four key themes were identified and all suggest a dichotomy between ‘love and affection’ and ‘sex’, with the women indicating that they prefer the former but believe that ‘their’ men want, prefer and ‘need’ the latter.

\(^1\) In hindsight it would have been useful to gather information about the social class of participants because this may have been a relevant lens through which to consider the data; the intersections of social class and heterosexual practices and identities are often neglected in the existing literature.
Results and Discussion

1. Women ‘desiring desire’ versus men’s ‘insatiable desire’

In light of the complexity revealed in the literature it was unsurprising that the women’s talk about sex demonstrated contrasting accounts. The predominant story which emerged was that of men’s active sexuality in contrast to women’s passive sexuality. However, there were some more agentic accounts in the data, and this was particularly noticeable around the topic of sexual desire. A few of the participants were keen to articulate that they thought about and wanted sex, and positioned themselves as having an active sexuality (Allen, 2003a, 2003b; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Hockey et al., 2007). As Petula said: ‘I really really do crave sex constantly. I think it’s true that for a lot of women, certainly for myself, the more you have sex, the more you want sex’. Furthermore, an interest in sex was understood as positive: as Mary stated, ‘I’ve always had quite a high sex drive, I think I’ve always felt like my sex drive has been quite healthy’. Mary’s comments and similar comments from other participants displayed their understanding that to want sex is ‘healthy’. This reflects mainstream cultural notions that position ‘wanting sex’ within a discourse of ‘health’ and ‘normality’ (Hite, 1976/2004:388), and where not wanting sex is pathologised.

However, the dominant account within the data was of experiencing a clear lack of desire. Heather commented ‘I’ve never found myself with a sex drive, very infrequently’, and Liv stated ‘I don’t think I have a hugely high sex drive’. Both these women, and many of the others, had little interest in sex, echoing what Fine (1988) termed the ‘missing discourse of desire’. Yet despite the prevalence of a lack of desire, all the women framed sexual desire as desirable. They conceptualised a desire
for sex as a ‘normal’, ‘innate’, and ‘natural’ part of a relationship, reflecting normative understandings of biologically based sexual ‘drives’ and desires (e.g., Gavey, McPhillips & Braun, 1999; Tyler, 2008). As Mary commented, ‘it would be unnatural not to have sex’. Alice asked ‘why do I never feel horny?’, and Heather said that if she ‘could suddenly take a pill which would make me a bit more horny I actually would do it.’

While Heather and Mary explicitly mentioned that they would like to have a sex drive, others talked more implicitly about this issue. For example, some of the women felt that something was wrong with them, and positioned themselves as ‘weird’ (Clare) or ‘really sad’ (Liv) because they did not have a desire for sex very often. They also talked as if there was pressure for them to have a sex drive, which made them feel uncomfortable: ‘I take comfort in speaking to those people that I know have ‘once a week sex’ and see it as a bit of a chore. I don’t like talking to the people who love sex and have loads of sex, it makes me feel that something’s lacking. From me’ (Heather).

Similarly, Alice commented that: ‘Magazines tend to give you the impression that... people are doing it an awful lot more than you. [...] There’s constant references to ‘is your sex life up to scratch’?’

These quotations reveal the way in which the women not only situated their lack of desire for sex (per se) as problematic, but also located their own lack of desire as ‘the problem’ in their relationships, rather than locating either men’s desires, or cultural expectations around sex, as the source of the ‘problem’. Bancroft (2002) cautions against labelling a lack of desire in women as a dysfunction, specifically referring to
the prescription of drugs such as ‘female Viagra’. This ties in with concerns raised by
Tiefer (2001, 2008) who has emphasised that women’s desire to have a ‘sex drive’
puts the pharmaceutical companies in a powerful position, through which they can
take advantage of women’s vulnerability by oversimplifying sexual ‘problems’ and
making women think they are curable through drugs. In her campaign against the
creation of the ‘illness’ of ‘female sexual dysfunction’ (www.newviewcampaign.org)
she highlights her concerns around the pharmaceutical companies promoting drugs
as ‘magic fixes’. Tiefer and others argue that an individual women’s ‘lack of sexual
desire’ is not easily reducible to a medical diagnosis: there may be many reasons why
women lack a desire for sexual activity, ranging from ‘individual’ causes such as stress
or relationship difficulties (e.g., Bancroft, 2002; Bancroft et al., 2003; Drew, 2003) or
more overarching causes such as the expectations and constraints of mainstream
culture.

While not advocating that it is appropriate to simply ‘normalise’ women lacking
sexual desire, the idea of pharmaceutical intervention has wide-ranging implications
around the ‘promotion’ of illness in order to sell a ‘cure’. In contrast there is far less
focus on the physiological, psychological, or even relational side effects, or indeed
the effectiveness, of such ‘cures’. While in recent years research has considered the
(sometimes negative) impact of men’s Viagra use on women in their heterosexual
relationship (e.g., Potts, Gavey, Grace & Vares, 2003; Potts, Grace, Gavey & Vares,
2004), there has been little interest in exploring the impact of women’s Viagra on
women or their partners.
Furthermore, Alice’s reference to magazines in particular suggests that conduits of popular culture (such as women’s magazines, and perhaps sex ‘manuals’) shape some women’s view of their own (lack of) sexual desire (Tyler, 2008), by presenting a homogeneous set of (arguably unachievable) ideals in relation to sex (e.g., Caldas-Coulthard, 1996). While this is an area which has not entirely escaped the attention of feminist researchers (e.g., Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Hockey et al., 2007; Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008), it requires ongoing and further investigation in order to understand the ever changing and complex links between popular cultural discourses and the ways in which women make sense of their lived experience.

Not only did the women lack desire (despite desiring desire), they often also minimised any importance around sex within their relationship. Liv commented: ‘I don’t think it [sex] is that important. If I was honest’, and she was not alone, and yet many women reported in engaging in (somewhat) regular sexual activity. The interviews probed the women to explore why they would engage in sexual activity if they lacked desire, and if sex lacked importance. However their responses reflected a struggle to articulate the ways in which sex is important to them other than it simply being ‘the done thing’: ‘It’s never been important to me actually, y’know it’s always been something, you’re in a relationship with somebody and you sleep with them and that’s it’ (Clare). Mary drew on the notion of relational reciprocity when she stated that: ‘I feel like, he would like to have a sex life, and I feel like that part of a relationship is about give and take’. This suggests that reciprocity exists not only during coitus itself as previously identified (Braun et al., 2003), but also around a wider context of how, when and why sex happens within the relationship. Here Mary
also introduces the notion of engaging in sex because ‘he’ [her partner] wants to
have a ‘sex life’, which was echoed throughout many of the other women’s accounts.
So in stark contrast to the women’s reports of lacking desire, their understanding of
men’s desire was unambiguous: men need sex and their desire for it is ubiquitous.
Heather said: ‘I do it because I know a man needs it’. Clare commented: ‘[h]e’s a
man, and I think that’s a man’s thing. Men always think of the relationship as sex’.
The women understood men as actively sexual, felt that their ‘needs’ should be met,
and positioned themselves as having a ‘duty’ to meet those ‘needs’. Hence the
women’s talk strongly reflected the ‘male sexual drive discourse’ (Hollway, 1989:54)
where for men sex is a ‘natural’ necessity. The women’s accounts drew on and
reinforced traditional notions of masculinity, and in the main did not invoke more
progressive constructions of masculinity (e.g., Allen, 2007; Terry & Braun, 2009).
In the main then, the women’s talk echoed binary understandings of sex and sexual
desire. Their discussion of ‘desire’ was underpinned by a continuum of desire, with
men and their ‘rampant desires’ (and need for sex) at one end of the continuum and
women and their lack of desire at the other end.

2. Sex equals penetration

While the women were not directly asked in this research about their specific sexual
practices, their talk nonetheless authenticated the coital imperative. (Hetero)sex was
clearly understood by the women as meaning penis-in-vagina intercourse.
Furthermore, penis-in-vagina intercourse was portrayed not just as an inherent part
of sex, but as the very definition of sex itself. Mary stated: ‘sex is penetration. That’s
how I would kind of define it’, and Heather echoes her in the comment that: ‘sex for
me is pretty black and white. Sex for me is intercourse and that’s it’. Any other sexual acts besides penetration were viewed as part of a ‘sexual package’, a ‘warm-up’ in preparation for the ‘main event’. As Liv said ‘It’s the build up, there’s the foreplay, and then you have intercourse’. Mary agreed, seeing the ‘build-up’ as a ‘healthy part of sex: ‘Well I think that sex is just penetration but I think that it should be accompanied by foreplay, in order to have a healthy sex life, it can’t just be about penetration, there’s gotta be a build up and there’s gotta be the foreplay around it’. Mary’s framing of how sex ‘should’ happen clearly echoes formulations put forward by sexual script theorists (for a summary of these ‘scripts’ see Frith & Kitzinger, 2001).

The women’s talk echoed conventional heteronormative understandings of sex and of ‘the coital imperative’ (McPhillips et al., 2001:238-9), according to which penis-in-vagina intercourse is an assumed and ‘compulsory’ part of sex. Even if sex was conceptualised as more than penis-in-vagina intercourse, coital sex was viewed as an obligatory ‘goal’ of sex. This is exemplified by Sarah in her statement that: ‘y’know obviously, penetrative sex is like the main thing’, indicating that it is only when intercourse has happened that the ‘sexual package’ is complete (Gavey et al., 1999:35). Researchers have highlighted the risks associated with (usually unprotected) penis-in-vagina intercourse for both men and women. For women in particular though, penetrative vaginal intercourse poses both direct (e.g., STDs, HIV/AIDs, unwanted pregnancy) and indirect risks (cervical cancer caused by specific STDs, the side effects of contraception, the social and psychological outcomes of unwanted pregnancy). While the coital imperative remains intact (Gavey et al., 1999)
women (and men) are expected to regularly engage in an act even when it has the potential to jeopardise their health and wellbeing, and when it might not be pleasurable for both parties involved. The coital imperative also sanctions penis-in-vagina intercourse as the only sexual option, rather than it existing as one item on a varied sexual ‘menu’. This focus on penis-in-vagina intercourse has come under scrutiny in relation to pleasure; while (hetero)sex is assumed to be the most appropriate source of pleasure, this is not always the case for (heterosexual) women (e.g., Hite, 1976/2004; Bancroft, 2002).

3. (Lack of) pleasure, passivity, and women’s ‘gatekeeping’ of sex

When the women’s talk turned to pleasure, the nuances of individual women’s experiences became apparent, and the women’s enjoyment of sexual activity varied significantly. Some of the women were enthusiastic about their enjoyment in sex, focusing on orgasm as the site of their pleasure. Sarah stated that ‘orgasm is the best thing I ever found to be honest.’ Potts (2000: 56) has identified an ‘orgasm imperative’ in which the orgasm is viewed as ‘natural’, the emotional and physical conclusion to (hetero)sex, and the women’s talk reflected this notion. For example, Mary, who has never orgasmed, said: ‘always in the back of my head is that […] I have enjoyed what we’ve had but could I have enjoyed it more?’ Even those who expressed enthusiasm about sex and their sexual pleasure commented that they had no desire to instigate sex: ‘once it’s happening I enjoy it, and then I think after ‘why don’t we do this more often’? (Clare). However, some of the women spoke about an absence of pleasure in sex:
'He’ll say ‘oh, did you enjoy that?’ and I’ll go ‘oh yeah’ and really I just can’t wait to watch Eastenders and that’s sad I know. [...] Obviously if I’m not enjoying it... then I’m having to pretend I am. [...] He puts all this effort into it bless him (laughs) and I’d be just as happy with a cup of tea’ (Heather).

Early sex research and sex manuals that focused on sexual pleasure have been critiqued for emphasising men’s pleasure more than women’s. In reviewing the biomedical, nursing, and feminist literature, Hyde discussed the way in which women may see (hetero)sex as ‘routine that comes with the deal of marriage or partnership’ (2007:318). Hence, women’s pleasure in the experience of penis-in-vagina intercourse seems ambivalent. However, Heather’s narrative indicates that her partner cares about her pleasure, perhaps more than she does. While the women’s talk mainly shored up traditional notions of heterosex and heterosexuality, at times they spoke of deep and caring relationships with their partners, demonstrating that the women report alternative ‘versions’ of masculinity, and reflecting the complexity of heterosexuality (e.g., Allen, 2007; Hickey et al., 2007; Terry & Braun, 2009).

Furthermore, the women recognised themselves as the ‘gatekeepers’ of sex within their relationships and they decided whether (what they perceived as) men’s ‘needs’ for sex were met. Some of the women talked about sex as something that they consented to if they felt ‘he’ deserved it. In doing so, they drew on a notion of fairness and reciprocity in relationships and positioned sex as a reward for ‘good behaviour’: ‘He’s bought me a nice meal, or something, I might think ‘yeah that’s a fair swap’ (Heather). Just as sex could be ‘given’, equally it could be withheld: ‘he’d been annoying me so when we went in bed I just turned over and went to sleep’
Because women ‘want’ sex less, they ‘give’ or ‘offer’ (or, indeed, withhold) any sexual activity that takes place.

While the women in this study held the role of gatekeeping sexual activity, it fell to men to initiate sex, reflecting cultural notions of men’s active role within (hetero)sex. As Petula commented ‘I don’t really ever want to be the one to initiate it.’ Similarly, Heather said ‘he knows I don’t have a particularly high sex drive, he really lets me play it by ear. […] I have to let him know’. It is Heather who ‘lacks’ a high sex drive, but rather than this meaning that she decides when to initiate sex, instead she lets her partner know when it would be a good time for him to initiate sex.

The women also experienced sex as embedded in love and romance; something that is ‘natural’ and ‘magical’. For example, Alice commented: ‘I think if I don’t have enough affection, or there’s no romance, or he doesn’t seem to be putting any effort in whatsoever, then, I must admit, I do find it much harder.’ Consider also, this extract from Pippa’s interview, in which Pippa clearly described (hetero)sex as something that is meant be to ‘magical’:

Nikki: ‘Before you had sex did you talk about having sex?’

Pippa: ‘No, no I think that takes the magic away’.

Some of the women reported engaging in unwanted but consensual sex. They emphasised that they did not feel ‘forced’, but that it was just easier to engage in sex when ‘he’ (their partner) wanted to. In this sense the women seemed to be actively making a choice to be passively present in sex to satisfy their partner’s ‘needs’. When asked whether she ever said no to her husband’s ‘throwing himself at her’, Madge
commented that if she did: ‘we have a sulk and he’s tossing and turning all night and
y’know, it’s not worth it to be honest’. When Jessica talked about this issue, she often
laughed and her laughter was uncomfortable, clearly implying she was well aware
that this type of sex was far from ‘ideal’: ‘[B]ut sometimes you have to give in
(laughs). [...] I might say to him ‘alright but if you’re quick’ (laughs). Something along
those lines. ‘Just be quick’! And I probably, y’know, I’m just submissive about it
really’.

Clearly Jessica felt that at times, at least, she was passive in her sexual relationship.
She also raised the issue of ‘quickie sex’. It has been argued that ‘quickies’ reinforce
men’s active sexuality as a priority over women’s passive or submissive sexuality
(Potts, 1998), and while women remain recipients of men’s desire, their enjoyment of
sex is questionable (e.g., Drew, 2003). Potts (1998) critiques the heterosexual
Romance and Passion* (Gray, 1995). This genre of publication is influential in
‘regulating current trends in sexual practices including women’s perception of sex
and desire’ (Potts, 1998:153). Gray’s clients were encouraged to engage in ‘quickies’
because ‘to be patient and regularly take the time that a woman needs in sex, a man
needs to enjoy the occasional quickie’ (Gray, 1995:77, quoted in Potts, 1998:159).
Gray reports one of his male clients explaining to his partner during a therapeutic
session that ‘if you are ok with occasional quickies, I promise to never expect you to
respond. It will just be your gift to me. I don’t expect you to get anything out of it.
You can lie there like a dead log!’ The woman, unsurprisingly, is less convinced; ‘I still
don’t feel comfortable with the idea of quickie sex’ (Gray, 1995:79, quoted in Potts,
1998:160). ‘Quickie’ sex’ is not embedded in women’s own interests or enjoyment, but perpetuates the dominance of men’s interests in discourses of sexual pleasure. This engagement in unwanted consensual sex supports ‘sexual script’ theories where women are ‘emotionally available to men’ which in turn ‘makes it difficult for women to refuse sex’ (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001:215). Acknowledging women’s participation in unwanted sex has been termed ‘speaking the unspeakable’ (see, Gavey, 1992:325).

There are many reasons why women may be persuaded or coerced into sex. These include not thinking about refusal as a potential option, instead seeing the idea that sex is required and compulsory as ‘normal’. Nonetheless, coerced consent is an important topic to consider in relation to women’s power and pleasure within heterosex (Gavey, 1992).

4. Love and affection

Women’s appreciation of love and affection stood in sharp contrast to the lack of importance they attributed to sex for themselves. They defined affection as mainly cuddling, kissing and holding hands, and viewed it as an important part of their relationship: ‘Affection means cuddling and kissing really. It doesn’t mean sex. It means the sort of stuff apart from sex, and it’s really important to me.’ (Mary). Petula said: ‘we all need to feel like the gentleness and that, warmth from somebody so I think it’s really important’. These excerpts clearly show that women valued affection and viewed it not just as important, but as something that women in particular need in order to know ‘that they’re loved and y’know, kind of cared for’ (Liv). The importance of affection in the women’s accounts echoes Hollway’s (1989) ‘have and hold’ discourse where women are understood to be emotionally ‘needy’ and to
require ‘looking after’ and being loved within (heterosexual) relationships.

Alternatively, a more positive reading is that these women derive pleasure and support from their partner and their relationships, which are about more than sex alone (Hockey et al., 2007).

The women not only highly valued love and affection, but also perceived it as becoming increasingly important as their relationships progressed. As Heather stated ‘I would say it’s much more affection now and less sex’. The women told a familiar story of lust turning to love over the course of a long-term relationship, and while sex became less frequent as their relationship progressed, it also became more enjoyable. As Pippa said: ‘It’s less now. But I think it’s more meaningful now. It means more to me. Like before it was just an activity. But then, now it’s more like an act of love. If you know what I mean, like it’s not just sex, it’s a real bond. [...] Although we don’t have it as often, it’s more… quality’. Jessica echoed this notion when she stated: ‘It’s more pleasurable and I just think that it means more to me really. Before it was just, ooh quick let’s have sex, lust, it was lust and now it’s more love and passion’. While the women did not directly say so, it seemed that sex, in common with dominant cultural narratives, served as a bonding experience, fortifying the relationship in its early stages. Pippa certainly saw sex as ‘a real bond’, implying that once a bond has been established, less sex is required to maintain it. As time went on, the women placed less value on sex, instead perceiving the love and affection that their partner was able to offer them as far more meaningful. This evokes men’s reports of their ‘mature’ sexuality brought about by the ‘emotional growth’ of a long term relationship (Terry & Braun, 2009).
Conclusion

This research offers insights into the way a (small) group of British women conceptualised (hetero)sex within their (long-term) relationships. The women’s talk constructed a dichotomy of ‘love and affection’ and ‘sex’, with women enjoying the former, but most finding little or limited pleasure in the latter, despite their desiring a desire for, and pleasure in, sexual activity. Problematic but formerly dominant discourses of heterosexuality such as the ‘missing discourse of desire’ (Fine, 1988) the ‘coital imperative’ (McPhillips et al., 2001) and ‘male sexual drive discourse’ (Hollway, 1989) were strikingly apparent in the data. These, alongside women’s participation in unwanted consensual sex, indicate that women are experiencing minimal sexual pleasure, and instead are compromising their own sexual enjoyment in order to satisfy (what they perceive as) men’s ‘needs’. Correspondingly the women’s narratives in this study did not (in the main) reflect a liberated or empowered version of women’s sexuality (e.g., Jackson, 2006; Sieg, 2007; Hockey et al., 2007). Instead, this research highlights how gender inequalities around sex remain in evidence and the findings offer implications for feminist research and practice in the broad domain of sexuality and women’s wellbeing, as well as in relation to the more specific domains of sex education and sexual health.

Although less apparent, in places the women’s narratives indicated their agency and enjoyment in (hetero)sex. Although these excerpts were considerably less common, they have been included here to provide a nuanced account of the data. Further, their minimal presence serves to emphasise that if feminist research is to serve any emancipatory agenda, which moves beyond monolithic and subordinating accounts
of women’s sexuality (Hockey et al., 2007), then we must continue to focus on the topic of hetero(sex) and unpick ways in which more liberatory accounts might be enabled. To this end, there is a pressing need to make different constructions of (hetero)sex more widely available to young people, in order to challenge both the normative understandings of the ‘nature’ of men and women’s desire and the script for (hetero)sexual encounters. It has been argued that sexuality education is framed around more traditional gender roles with a focus on (the avoidance of) reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases (Johnson, 1996; Allen, 2004). It has been highlighted that this promotes narrow and negative discourses of sexuality (Johnson, 1996) which do little to move beyond the ‘missing discourse of desire’ (Fine, 1988). Allen (2004) discusses how the inclusion of ‘a discourse of erotics’ within sexuality education has the potential to empower women. Doing so could provide them with the entitlement to experience desire and pleasure in (hetero)sex. Such an approach need not exclude health, but instead would allow women to be active subjects who are able to initiate safe sex themselves.

This small piece of research makes evident the complexities of women’s lived realities and the contradictory discourses that are available to them to make sense of their experiences of sexuality and relationships. To unpick these complexities further, future research which used a larger sample of women would be useful in supporting and elaborating upon existing findings. There were limitations in our sample, both in its size, but also in our lack of attention to the ways in which social class intersect with heterosexuality. Previous research has indicated that class and age are relevant constructs when considering matters of sex and sexuality (Hockey et al., 2007).
Future research in this area that included men and/or both partners in the discussion would be useful in understanding the different discourses that men and women draw on when discussing their experiences of sexuality and sexual relationships. Men are less commonly participants in feminist research, but purposive sampling and the use of innovative techniques to encourage engaged participation could offer further insight into men’s beliefs and understandings of (hetero)sex and (hetero)sexuality. Furthermore, research that considered strategies for long term change of men’s and women’s experiences of (hetero)sex would be useful within education, policy and healthcare.
Notes

1. Because the term ‘long-term’ is not definitive, we chose to recruit in such a way that allowed the women to decide whether or not they considered their relationship to be ‘long-term’. Details of the length of each woman’s relationship can be seen in Table 1.

2. Throughout this paper the authors use the term ‘heterosexual relationship’ to refer to a relationship between a ‘man’ and a ‘woman’. However, in doing so, we acknowledge the problematic nature of the term. A relationship between a man and a woman may include one or more members who identify as non-heterosexual, which raises questions about whether the relationship can be easily categorised as ‘heterosexual’. While nine of the ten women in this research identified as heterosexual (and to the best of our knowledge were in a relationship with a heterosexual man) one participant was a bisexual woman.
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References


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Table 1: Demographic details of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Length of relationship</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>1 year, 8 months</td>
<td>White UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pippa</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Black British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petula</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liv</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Black African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madge</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>27 years</td>
<td>White British</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>