What is good sex? : young people, sexual pleasure and sexual health services

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What is good sex?: Young people, sexual pleasure and sexual health services

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Thesis presented for the degree of Doctorate in Philosophy

Faculty of Health and Social Care

The Open University

June 2013

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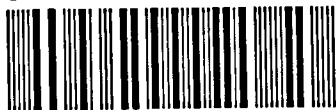
Abstract

This thesis investigates young people's understandings and experiences of 'good sex' and sexual pleasure, documenting the resources young people use to make sense of these meanings in the context of their everyday lives and relationships. The study uses a situated approach to explore the methodological possibilities for researching sexual pleasure with a diverse group of young people in one urban location and to examine the ways in which pleasure is embedded, mediated and gendered in young people's sexual cultures. The research is used to contribute to debates about the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health services for young people and make suggestions for future research/practice.

Drawing on data from survey, focus group and interview methods the thesis documents the diversity of young people's understandings of 'good sex' and sexual pleasure, suggesting that young people have access to a range of competing discursive and affective frameworks for making distinctions between what counts as 'good' and 'bad' sex. Analyses suggest that sexual meanings and values are contested and contingent on young people's shifting sex and relationship experiences and social locations. Timeliness and reciprocity emerged as key contested areas, shaped by enduring gender arrangements and participants' evolving sexual biographies.

The thesis provides a reflexive account of the practice of researching sexual pleasure with young people, reporting on each method to argue that the findings are situated, shaped by interactive and material context. The research documents the benefits of using critical feminist reflexivity to interrogate how

researcher/practitioners can create safe spaces for engaging young people in work around sexual pleasure and concludes that possibilities for realising the 'pleasure project' in practice will depend on local, institutional and political context.

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Acknowledgements

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction – journeys and transitions

The right to sexual pleasure has been central to the politicizing of sexuality for sexually marginalised groups for over half a century. More recently this discourse of politicized pleasure has been applied to young people in attempt to both critique contemporary sexual health and education work with young people and to advocate for improved, more effective sexuality education and sexual health service provision. Broadly, these arguments suggest that a more positive and holistic model of sexual health that foregrounds the emotional and physical pleasures of sex and relationships, would produce more favourable and gender equitable sexual health outcomes for young people. Drawing on data from 178 questionnaires, 4 focus groups and 16 interviews, as well as insights from exploratory and pilot work and observations in a range of practice settings, this thesis engages critically with these debates, exploring how young people negotiate understandings and experiences of 'good sex' and reflexively examines the practice of engaging young people in work around sexual pleasure.

In this introductory chapter I outline four transitions that have taken place over the course of my doctoral study, which started in February 2009 and is ending in summer 2013. In providing this account I aim to map out key contexts and concepts that frame this thesis and to situate myself within this frame. In using the metaphor of 'transition' I point towards the body of research in youth studies that is concerned with mapping the individual and structural changes that shape young people's experiences and the ways in which concepts of 'youth' are intimately tied up with social change and transition in popular, political and academic imaginings

(Heath et al 2009, Jones and Wallace 1992). Further this metaphor references the ways in which the doctoral experience gets talked about as a 'journey' that needs to be recorded and accounted for. It also points towards the overall structure and narrative thread in this thesis, which follows my doctoral 'journey' sequentially through time and method, as summarised at the end of this chapter.

I start by situating my personal research journey in the context of broad historical changes that have occurred over the past half a century and within a contemporary political and policy context which is also in transition, following the change in national government in the UK in May 2010. As I illustrate below, there may be grounds for pessimism in the current political climate amid fears that we are 'going backwards' in relation to young people's sex education and sexual well-being. In order to avoid a 'politics of hopelessness' (Hey 2012) and to understand the diversity of sexual values presented in this thesis it is necessary however to situate the current political moment within the context of what social historian Jeffrey Weeks has termed, 'a long, unfinished but profound revolution that has transformed the possibilities of living sexual diversity and creating intimate lives' (Weeks 2007: ix-x). It is only as a result of these broad social changes that it has become possible to debate the potential inclusion of pleasure in youth sexuality agendas and to conduct research that asks young people to consider the question, 'what is 'good sex?'.

Social transformations and historical context - the long unfinished sexual revolution

In *The World We Have Won* Weeks (2007) argues that there were a number of wide-ranging social transformations between the 1960s and 1990s that can be understood as a period of 'great transition', which Weeks argues has been

overwhelmingly positive for the vast majority of people in the Western world, and increasingly those in the global south. Weeks argues although there may have been periods of back-lash and fierce contestation around sexual values there is evidence of a consistent historical trend towards liberalisation, secularisation and growing grassroots agency (Weeks 2007, Weeks 2000).

Empirical work with young people suggests that these broad shifts have had an impact on the ways that young people understand and talk about their sexual lives and identities (Holland and Thomson 2010, Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 2007). In their study of young people's sexual values Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson (2005) note that with the decline of traditional value systems and institutions such as marriage and the church, there has been a pluralisation of authorities on sexuality and a proliferation of sexual voices and narratives (Sharpe and Thomson 2005, Weeks 2007). This means that there is no single moral authority that shapes young people's views about what counts as 'good' or 'legitimate' sex, but rather 'a range of competing discourses or 'regimes' which provide a framework for legitimating sex, and within which distinctions between good sex and bad sex can be made' (Sharpe and Thomson 2005:13).

Social researchers and theorists have sought to develop new languages for explaining this new plurality, generating optimistic accounts of increased diversity and fluidity such as Anthony Giddens' (1992) 'plastic sexuality' and the 'pure relationship' and Sasha Roseneil's (2002) identification of a weakening of the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality. These accounts are continually held in tension (and often fervently contested) with accounts of young people's sexual lives and cultures that emphasise the absence of progressive

social change and the reconfiguration of restrictive gender and sexual norms that are often compounded by class and racial inequalities.

Researchers point to continued homophobia in schools and in young people's peer groups and highlight the ways in which queer spaces are increasingly commodified requiring a certain level of economic and cultural capital to inhabit (Hennessy 1995, 2000). Feminist activists and researchers have highlighted the continued existence of gender hierarchies in heterosexual relations and the persistence of sexual violence, as well as documenting the ways in which sexual 'liberation' can impose new forms of constraint (Jackson and Scott 1996, Maitland 1988, Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs 1986). Further as Rachel Thomson (2000) has argued, evidence of different ways of thinking and talking about sex does not necessarily mean that young people have more freedom to create unique identities and desires. As her research documents, the contemporary pluralism of sexual values is underpinned by powerful and enduring gender asymmetries that are effectively enforced and policed within young people's moral communities.

Making sense of this uneven 'progress' towards greater sexual freedom and diversity requires an understanding of change and continuity and the ways in which these shifts give rise to 'major areas of contest' in the 'imaginary line' between 'good' and 'bad' sex (Rubin 1984, Jackson and Scott 2004, Holland and Thomson 2010). This research – made possible by the long, uneven and unfinished sexual revolution – contributes to these debates exploring how meanings of 'good sex' are produced, contested and embedded within the sexual cultures[1] of my participants.

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[1] In referring to sexual cultures I am using the term 'culture' in its broadest sense, drawing on Raymond Williams' 'social' definition of culture as 'a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and

Transition 1: Political transitions and policy contexts

"XES: We can't go backwards" (Brook and FPA 2012)

When I started my PhD in February 2009 the Labour Party had been in government in the UK for over a decade during a time of national economic growth and prosperity and increasing socio-economic inequality (Dorling 2010). During this time the government invested significantly in the welfare state with a particular policy focus on children and young people as part of a strategy for tackling social exclusion (SEU 1997). Research and practice in young people's sexual health and education during this time was framed by New Labour's teenage pregnancy and social exclusion agenda resulting in a move towards the provision of more comprehensive sex and relationship education (SRE).

In 1999 the Labour Government's Social Exclusion Unit published a report on *Teenage Pregnancy* that identified Britain as having the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Western Europe and set out the need to reduce these rates through addressing issues such as education, housing and self-esteem, as well as through providing sexual health services and information. The report was followed by a ten year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS) that aimed to reduce under-18 conception rates by 50%. The report has been criticised for the ways in which it perhaps unintentionally pathologised teenage mothers and focused on the provision of sex education and career pathways for young mothers whilst failing to address the correlation between teenage fertility and socio-economic inequalities

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ordinary behaviour' (1961: 57). As Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith argue, from this point of view, 'sexual cultures' includes 'the ways that sexual knowledge is constructed, how sexual values and norms are struggled over, how sex is depicted, talked about and 'done" (2011: 237). Following from this, Attwood and Smith argue that an analysis of culture 'traces the ways that meanings, values and experiences are constructed and framed in institutions, media and other forms of communication, artefacts and the practices of everyday life' (2011: 237).

(Arai 2003). Despite these criticisms and the failure to meet the ambitious targets set out in the policy, rates did decline by 25% and the TPS included a significant increase in funding for sexual health services, sex education and support for teenage mothers in and out of school (*ibid.*).

Nearly ten years after the publication of the TPS former Schools Minister Jim Knight announced that Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) would become part of a statutory Personal, Social, Health, Economic (PSHE) curriculum in England as part of the forthcoming Children, Schools and Families Bill. This motion was celebrated as an historic victory by many sexual health professionals and campaigning bodies who had long argued that making PSHE compulsory would elevate the subject to the same status as other curriculum subjects, helping to lead to improved and more consistent provision across schools. This announcement built on the increased funding for outreach sex education and the publication in 2000 of new guidance on delivering SRE in schools (DfEE 2000). Although non-statutory, the new guidance was comprehensive and its location of SRE within the PSHE and Citizenship Curriculum marked an attempt to move beyond reductionist and biological frameworks for delivering sex education (Monk 2001). As several critics have noted however the conceptual framework that underpins the guidance is contradictory, with protectionist concerns about childhood sexuality and a morally informed public health agenda limiting the potential of the guidance to realise the broader aims of SRE (Monk 2001, Spencer et al 2008, Hirst 2008, Alldred and David 2007). Whilst the guidance may allude to a discourse of empowerment and young people's rights to make 'informed choices' it makes clear what the 'right choices' should be – avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and delaying sexual intercourse –

ultimately prioritising a public health rather than a social justice agenda (Spencer et al 2008).

Research on young people's views of sex education in the UK consistently shows that young people are not satisfied with the quality or the quantity of sex education that they receive, which is frequently characterised by campaigners as 'too little, too late and too biological' (SEF 2008, UKYP 2007). A frequently cited example of this research is a survey of 20,000 young people by the UK Youth Parliament in 2007 which found that 40% of young people rated their sex education as poor or very poor, with a further 33% saying that it was average. Reports by Ofsted, the official government body for inspecting schools, confirm these findings suggesting that sex education provision continues to be patchy and inconsistent with significant variation in the quality of teaching and resources used across schools (i.e. Ofsted 2007, 2010, 2013).

In May 2010, one month into my fieldwork and in the midst of a global economic 'crisis', there was a general election leading to the formation of a new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government and a subsequent era of 'austerity', welfare spending cuts and radical health, education and welfare policy reform. As part of this era of 'new responsibilities and resources for local government' (DoH 2012; 6), responsibility for public health service commissioning, which includes sexual health, has been devolved to local authorities (DoH 2012). Although the Government's 2011 White Paper *Healthy Lives, Healthy People* makes public health a strategic priority area and details a commitment to ring-fence public health funding, sexual health receives limited mentioned in this document or in the *Public health outcomes framework for England 2013-2016* published in January 2012 (DoH 2013).

Amid disputes about the rights of parents to withdraw their children from compulsory sex education classes and the rights of faith schools to abstain from delivering SRE, the clause committing to statutory SRE was removed from the Children and Families Bill that was eventually pushed through parliament by the Labour Government one month before the general election in May 2010. The new Coalition Government states that they are committed to providing 'comprehensive SRE' (Teather 2011). There is no indication of a commitment to statutory SRE however and public statements by several Conservative MPs advocating 'judgemental' (Farrow 2011) or 'abstinence' (Dorries 2011) approaches to sex education, suggest that this would be highly unlikely under the current government.

In 2012 sexual health charities Brook and the Family Planning Association launched the *XES – We Can't Go Backwards* campaign in response to what it refers to as 'a toxic mix of funding cuts, changes to policy, and outright extremist opposition' to 'many of the rights and choices we have come to take for granted' (Brook and FPA 2012). The *XES* campaign situates the current political context against a backdrop of 'more than 50 years' of people fighting for 'the right to understand, care for and improve their sexual health and relationships' and with the aim of ensuring that this momentum continues. Whilst narratives of progress and return are not always helpful for mapping social changes in relation to gender and sexuality, the title of the campaign captures the sense of an unwelcome and potentially troubling change in momentum that is reflected in recent academic work on the disproportionate impact of 'austerity' measures on young people's lives and futures (Allen et al, forthcoming 2013).

During the ten months that I spent in the 'field' the impact of austerity measures and radical policy shifts were only just beginning to emerge. It is largely through conversations that I have had with local practitioners after completing my fieldwork that I have learnt of the cuts to many of the services and projects that I visited during this time. The social world and policy domains into which I now consider the implications of my research are changed from the 'field' that I researched two years ago – domains that are now in transition, imbued with the structures and professional practices of the recent New Labour policy era as well as the uncertainty and cuts of the current era of 'austerity'.

Transition 2: Personal transitions and professional contexts

'I speak from many changed/changing positions' (Skeggs 1997: 34).

In Autumn 2008 I was working for a North London local authority as a Personal Advisor in the Leaving Care and Asylum Service and I wanted to leave. I loved the young people that I worked with and much of the work that I did but I had become increasingly frustrated and concerned about the extent to which my job involved 'training' vulnerable young people to play by the rules of a host of welfare and educational systems that I felt were often outrageously flawed and unjust. I wanted to find a way that I could continue to work with young people but in ways that would enable these young people (and me) to become part of some kind of project or process of social or political change.

During this time I saw that The Open University and the young people's sexual health charity Brook were looking to recruit a co-funded PhD student to undertake work in one of four identified research areas. Excited by the opportunity of working

at the interface of academic research and youth sexual health policy and practice, I applied to conduct research in the area of 'good sex' and 'self-esteem'. My motivations for starting a PhD were ambitious. I wanted to bridge the gap between research and practice and to find ways of working with young people to bring about changes to professional practice and policy decision making. I wanted to find a way of addressing the inequality and injustice that I worked with everyday and find a way out of the 'politics of hopelessness' (Hey 2012) that bubbled around my office and that seemed to threaten to suck me in.

In early 2009 I left my job to start the PhD, before returning to the borough a few months later to work at one of the young people's drop-in centres fire-fighting NEET (not in education, employment or training) figures and a steady stream of homeless young people who walked in the doors. This was the first of many part-time jobs that I have done over the last four years working with young people and their families in various institutional and community settings, whilst starting to forge new relationships with staff at Brook and find a place for myself in the academic communities that would house me for the duration of my doctoral study.

This unfinished transition from youth practitioner to youth researcher and my desire to locate myself at the interface of research-practice shaped the relationships that I was able to form during fieldwork (see Chapter three), as well as my interest in considering the implications of this research and the debates about pleasure inclusion for Brook and for youth sexual health and education practices more broadly. This is the focus of my discussion at the end of this thesis which I hope will form the basis for my next project which is to work with Brook over the next 12 months as part of an ESRC funded Knowledge Exchange project in order to embed the insights from the research into organisational practice.

Transition 3: Doctoral transitions – from self-esteem to 'good sex'

'Self-esteem is everything" (Anne Milton MP 2009).

I started my PhD with the working title *'Good sex': Health outcomes and self-esteem*, which I had selected from a list of four advertised possibilities. In terms that now seem vague and confused I set out to explore the relationship between self-esteem, 'good sex' and sexual risk-taking, with an interest in understanding what part gender difference and socio-economic inequalities played in this process. I wanted to research the question – *What constitutes 'good sex' for a young person and what enables a young person to have safe and enjoyable sex?* I framed my enquiry around the variable of self-esteem, drawing on a contradictory body of research that pointed towards the prevalence of this concept in research on young people's sexual behaviour and the lack of evidence to suggest that any relationship between young people's self-esteem and sexual behaviour can be said to exist (Goodson et al 2005). In the following two sections of this chapter I reflect on my shift away from this original line of enquiry as a way of setting up the key concepts that frame the analyses presented in this thesis.

Two months into my doctoral journey, at Brook's annual conference in March 2009, I listened to several sexual health practitioners talking of their concerns about the low self-esteem of the girls they worked with and how they felt this contributed towards these young women having unwanted and un-enjoyable sex. I also listened as one of the speakers, Conservative Shadow Health Minister Anne Milton MP, told the room that 'self-esteem is everything', offering this as both the explanation and solution to sexual risk-taking and poor sexual health outcomes. Although excited by a situation in which my PhD research, party politics and

professional practice seem to momentarily slide together, I was also suspicious of the ways in which self-esteem was being employed as a panacea for explaining poor sexual health whilst also being used to make sense of particular gendered experiences of sexual (dis)pleasure and (non)consensual sex.

In his review of the research literature on self-esteem for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Nick Emler (2001) observes that self-esteem is one of the most popular and frequently employed psychological explanations for social and behavioural problems. Emler suggests that with cues from social and media commentators, 'people have been willing to accept that a limited sense of self-worth lies behind just about every social and personal ill from drug abuse and delinquency to poverty and business failures' (Emler 2001). In his review however Emler found the research evidence on self-esteem to be mixed, arguing that there is a lack of consensus among researchers on what the term means and a scarcity of literature that can reliably show whether or not self-esteem is a risk factor for the range of social problems with which it is associated.

Feminist researchers have been critically engaging with discourses of self-esteem for several decades, exploring the 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1980) that have been developing around gender, education and success through the circulation and public sanctioning of these accounts (Kenway and Willis 1990). In the first year of my PhD I was particularly struck by the work of Sinikka Aapola, Marina Gonick and Anita Harris whose analysis of twenty-first century discourses of contemporary girlhood highlight the particularly prominent and problematic ways in which the concept of self-esteem has been popularised and politicised in highly gendered ways. In their analysis Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) identify two dominant discourses of contemporary girlhood. The first is the discourse of 'girl

power' that promotes the image of 'a new, robust, young woman with agency and a strong sense of self' (*ibid.*: 39). The second discourse they term 'Reviving Ophelia' after the 1994 publication by US therapist and academic Mary Pipher entitled *'Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls'*. Aapola and colleagues argue that this book is emblematic of a much wider discourse, particularly prevalent in the United States, about the apparent crisis of self-esteem which many girls have suffered as a 'consequence of a girl-hostile culture that denies them expression of their authentic selves in adolescence' (Aapola et al 2005: 45).

The authors suggest that the discourse of *'girl power'* is an upbeat, positive discourse of femininity that draws on feminist languages of freedom, empowerment and autonomy. They also argue however that this discourse is problematic in the ways in which it offers young women a 'can-do' approach that obscures the structural constraints that continue to affect their lives and futures. The authors suggest that the *Reviving Ophelia* discourse on the other hand draws attention to some of the difficulties and barriers that young women continue to face and the ways in which these can manifest in problems such as eating disorders, depression and high-risk behaviours. As in my conversations with several practitioners at the Brook conference mentioned above, the concept of self-esteem serves to highlight the fact that, despite significant socio-economic and cultural shifts that mean young women have greater social and sexual freedom than women in previous generations, they are not able to experience the same kinds of sexual freedoms and pleasures as their male counterparts.

Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) argue that the *'Reviving Ophelia'* discourse is also deeply problematic in the ways in which it individualises social problems and

promotes individualised solutions – namely that girls need to take responsibility for themselves and their problems, for example through seeking therapy and other forms of personal support. This approach, Aapola and colleagues (2005) argue, fails to recognise that the low self-esteem and many associated issues that young women experience are a result of the ways in which they internalise and individualise the structural inequalities that characterise late modern society. The authors conclude that while the 'Girl Power' and 'Reviving Ophelia' discourses may appear contradictory to each other, they are both grounded within an individualized understanding of society in which young women's subjectivities, successes and failures are seen as personal projects (Aapola et al 2005: 54).

In their research with young people in Canada Jean Shoveller and colleagues found that young people frequently used the concept of self-esteem to explain why 'other' young people engage in risky or unsanctioned behaviour such as having sex 'too early', with multiple partners or without protection (Shoveller et al 2004). The researchers found that young people applied this discourse of self-esteem in selective ways so that girls and young people of lower social standing (who were poor and/or unpopular) were much more likely to be labelled as having low self-esteem than boys and young people who were perceived to have a higher social standing (popular/attractive/wealthy). Shoveller and colleagues argue that this discourse of self-esteem is particularly problematic (and insidious when taken up by policy-makers and educators) because it can be taken to imply that the reasons why some young people engage in 'unsanctioned' sexual behaviours is to do with the kind of person they are - a person who lacks self-esteem or self-respect – and not to do with their social situation and peer relationships (Shoveller et al 2004, Shoveller and Johnson 2006).

My engagement with the body of critical literature outlined above and my observations of the problematic ways in which the concept of self-esteem gets taken up in policy arenas led to an interest in exploring more holistic and sociological frameworks for researching the concept of 'good sex'. A few months into my doctoral study I decided not to frame my line of enquiry around the relationship between young people's self-esteem and their understandings or experiences of 'good sex' but rather to ask the more exploratory question – *what is good sex?*

Asking this more exploratory question enabled me to adopt an inductive approach to my investigation of sexual meanings and meaning-making processes, making it possible to refuse to imagine in advance the kinds of variables that young people may or may not report as significant to their understandings and experiences of 'good sex'. Perhaps unsurprisingly the discourse of self-esteem that Jean Shoveller and colleagues identified in their research was evident in some young people's talk about good and bad sex and in the ways in which they gave value to certain individuals, practices and relationships and showed suspicion or disgust towards others, always in highly gendered ways (Shoveller et al 2004, Shoveller and Johnson 2006, Skeggs 1997). In Chapter five my discussion returns to the concept of 'self-esteem' to look at the ways in which female sexual pleasure and agency get talked about in focus group settings. Here I draw on Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen and Monica Rudberg's work (2007) on the figure of the 'used' girl and Beverley Skegg's (1997) work on ideas about excess, governance and respectability to understand the ways in which gender, generation and class get silently spoken about in group settings to mark out certain female bodies as sights of pleasure and others as sights of emotional or psychological dysfunction.

Despite my suspicion towards using the concept of self-esteem as an individualised explanation of sexual experience, I found that in my data analysis I could not ignore the suggestion that a young person's sense of esteem and value towards herself has something to do with her level of sexual enjoyment and the decisions that she takes about when and with whom to have what kind of sex, or whether to not have sex at all. As the focus of my research shifted to explore young people's sexual experiences, as well as understandings of 'good sex' I found I needed new theoretical tools to explore not just how 'self-esteem' becomes implicated in processes of social valuing and differentiation. In particular I needed to understand how young people's investments in subjective social and sexual identities come to form part of discursive-affective meaning making processes about 'good' and 'bad' sex (Wetherell 2012).

Transition 4: Theoretical transitions – from learning resources to sexual experience

'Really learning about it? You can hear about it, but...that's just hearing. You have to actually experience it, to know, the real pleasure.' (Pilot focus group participant, 2010).

Before starting fieldwork, I conducted two months of exploratory and pilot work with young people. In this section I provide a reflective account of this stage of the research. Whilst it may be unusual to include examples of data at this early stage in the thesis, I use extracts from pilot focus groups in order to explain the shift in my line of enquiry at this stage of the research and the subsequent search for a new theoretical 'tool-kit'.

Learning from experience: hierarchies of value

This exploratory and pilot stage consisted of meeting with five groups of young people, one group who were working at the Head Office of Brook as part of a 6 month volunteer placement and four groups of young people at a Further Education College in London. The aim of these exploratory sessions was to 'consult' (Kirby 2004) with young people about the research topic and design, to pilot different group discussion activities and to ask for young people's views and input on potential research methods and tools that I could incorporate into the study design. I also returned to the FE College a month later to pilot the questionnaire that I was designing with the six groups of young people. I was particularly interested in identifying the resources that young people said they were using to learn about sexual pleasure and to share some examples of different resources that I had found such as magazine articles, sexual health leaflets and songs such as Lily Allen's *It's Not Fair* which tells the story of a selfish male sexual partner who 'takes' pleasure without giving it back.

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In two sessions I asked the participants the question, 'how do young people learn about sex?' and wrote the answers on flipchart. The responses that they provided were familiar: pornography, TV, friends, sex education, religion, parents and 'practice' or 'personal experience'. These were the types of 'resources' that I imagined young people were using to learn about pleasure and that I reasoned would form the basis of subsequent research activities. When I asked these groups how they learnt about sexual pleasure and the 'positive side' of sex however, I was repeatedly told that the only way to learn about pleasure was *'by having sex'*.

In these groups, which largely consisted of young men, I was told that the only way to learn about pleasure was to *'actually experience'* the physical sensation of pleasure by having sex, oral sex, foreplay or by masturbating. As one young man explained, when he *hears* about pleasure he *'tingles'* as his *'boyness [is] processing'* what he is hearing, but that is not the same as *feeling* the sensation of pleasure in his *'boyness'* itself. When I probed further as to how you could learn about the 'positive things about sex' without having sex the young men told me that this was *'impossible'* and that *'you have to actually experience it to know'.*

The young men in these groups stated that girls should also learn about pleasure through masturbating and having sex, with one young man suggesting that a young woman who wanted to learn about pleasure but didn't want to have sex, could get herself a *'dildo'.* The young men also stated that sexually experienced young women were valuable sources of information about female sexual pleasure, claiming that *'a girl who puts herself about a bit can answer your questions'.* In the all-male group in particular, this discussion of the sexually experienced girl as a source of knowledge about pleasure was framed in the loaded language of 'slags' and 'virgins' suggesting that young women wishing to accrue value through engaging in this type of embodied, experiential learning and teaching may have to negotiate a precarious line between sexual expert and 'slag'.

Taking Jennifer Mason's definition of epistemology as 'what we regard as knowledge or evidence of things in the social world' (Mason 1996:13), it would seem that these young men were setting up a familiar *epistemology of pleasure* that gives value and authority to the sexually experienced male subject by refusing to acknowledge that there can be any basis for learning or understanding other than the 'tingling' and the 'feeling' of embodied sensation. Valerie Walkerdine

(1990) offers the insight that pedagogy produces not just particular versions of the knowledge of subjects but the very subject presumed-to-know. The pedagogy set up by the young men in these groups privileges the sexually experienced subject, a figure whose gendered configurations have been well documented in decades of feminist research (Lees 1986).

Conducting two months of exploratory work afforded me the opportunity to learn from my own 'actual experience' of talking to and consulting with young people. Arguably I should not have been surprised that the young people I met gave such value to their personal experience as a resource for sexual learning since this has been well documented in previous research with young people (i.e. Holland et al 1998, Kehily 2002, Lees 1986). In her research with young people in New Zealand, Louisa Allen (2005a) found that her participants made distinctions between sexual knowledge gained from 'second hand' sources such as friends, sexuality education, television and magazines and sexual knowledge gained from 'first hand practical experience' which they valued more highly (*ibid.* 39). This prioritisation became particularly apparent in couple interviews that she conducted in which it was the partner with the most practical experience who was often deemed the most knowledgeable (*ibid.*:41).

> Learning by doing is constituted as superior because it entails the 'real thing'. Actual engagement in an activity often offers a level of embodied knowledge not obtainable from secondary sources (Allen 2005a: 42).

Jenny Kitzinger refers to this as a 'hierarchy of credibility' operating between different types of sources of knowledge (1995:115). In her AIDS research project she found that focus group participants regularly appeared to change their minds

or opinions about the topics being debated in response to 'personal' evidence based on anecdotes rather than information from leaflets or advertisements (*ibid.*). In her ethnographic work with young people in schools, Mary Jane Kehily theorises these hierarchies of credibility and value in the context of young people's sexual and gendered cultures, offering insight into why certain kinds of sexual knowledge have currency in certain gendered spaces (2002, 2001). Kehily provides the example of a group of young men talking about how their sexual relationships with young women enabled them to acquire 'highly prized' sexual knowledge (2001:183-4). For these young men, 'getting a girlfriend' proved to be a much more effective kind of 'lesson' than those offered in sex education classes at school. As one young man stated, you can 'explore her and talk to her and learn about each other and you find out about each other. You teach yourself' (Kehily 2001: 183). In the context of an all-male peer group, talking about this kind of embodied, territorial (hetero)sexual knowledge functions as a way for young men to establish a confident and authoritative position within the group and to put down other young men.

Kehily's analysis highlights the ways in which particular forms of sexual experience become valued in particular contexts. Deborah Britzman explains this process of valuing and differentiation using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, arguing that there are different political economies of sexuality within which some forms of sexuality are valued and exchanged for 'social acceptance, social competence, pleasure, and power' and others that have 'no currency' (Britzman 2010 [1995]: 36, Thomson 2000b). For Britzman, questions of pleasure are useful for highlighting the contradictions within and between these different economies of value since there are some forms of sexuality that have 'no currency *yet still promise pleasure even when they cost social discouragement and ostracism* (*ibid.*:

69, emphasis in original). For Britzman it is the lived experience 'between and within' these different forms of sexual value and exchange that are interesting, potentially transgressive and queer.

Thinking with these questions of value and how they operate within particular gendered and sexualised contexts, shifts the question what *is* good sex, and how do young people *learn* about good sex, towards questions about what *counts* as good sex within particular contexts? What kinds of pleasures promise acceptance and power for young people, within what kinds of contexts, and which have 'no currency'? What are the social, emotional and physical costs of pursuing particular kinds of pleasure and how do young people experience the potential for pleasure to be both costly and beneficial? These are the questions that I return to throughout this thesis as I move the analytic lens over different biographical and group contexts to explore what counts as 'good sex'.

Talking from experience: creating safe spaces

During discussions with all of the groups held during the exploratory stage of the research, the young women and young men that I met used their own experiences as 'personal evidence' (Kitzinger 1995) for formulating their opinions and disagreeing with each other or with the statements that I had provided for discussion. In one group for example, a young man set the group discussion in motion by fervently disagreeing ('*Bullshit!*') with a quote I had provided that suggested that men selfishly pursue pleasure at their female partner's expense. When I asked him to explain why he disagreed with the statement, he stated, '*I'm a very caring lover actually*', going on to provide details of his own experiences

and preferences as a way of evidencing that these kinds of 'stereotypical' views on gender and sexual pleasure are incorrect and unfair.

Conversely, some young people who had not had sex told me they could not join in the discussion due to their lack of sexual experience. When I tried to draw one young man into a group discussion by asking him his view on talking with young people about pleasure in clinical settings he retorted, 'I haven't had sex, so don't even bother asking me'. Similarly when I later returned to pilot the questionnaire with some of these groups, one young woman told me that she couldn't answer several of the questions because she had not had sex yet, even though none of the questions asked her to detail or reflect on her own sexual experiences.

The value given to sexual experience as the only way of understanding and talking about pleasure within these group contexts seemed to carve out subject positions that made it difficult for young people who had not had sex to participate in the group discussion. Whilst this was a productive insight into the particular economies of value at play within these groups, it also suggested that there may be significant barriers to conducting group work with young people who have not had sex around the topic of sexual pleasure. This presented a dilemma for me as a researcher interested in researching young people with varying levels of sexual experience whilst also raising questions about the possibilities for putting the 'pleasure project' into practice in schools and other education contexts.

After conducting the pilot focus groups the tutor who arranged the sessions emailed me to say that although the group of students who were mainly 'virgins' 'loved me' it 'would have been better if they had met me first before talking about something so personal to them'. Her gentle reproach raised questions for me

about whether barriers to engaging young people in conversations around sexual pleasure are a question of *method* – the tools and relationship contexts within which the conversation takes place, or a question of *culture* – the hierarchies of value that give voice and credibility to some young people and not to others. Did the insights from the early stage of the research suggest that it was not possible to conduct group work with young people who have not had sex on the topic of sexual pleasure?

These questions informed the second key line of enquiry that frames this thesis: what methodological approaches and tools can be used to carry out ethical and productive research with young people on sexual pleasure? The insights from the exploratory stage suggested that in order to explore this further and investigate the methodological possibilities (as opposed to the cultural barriers) for researching sexual pleasure I needed to create 'safe spaces' (Fine 1988, Harris 2005) within which young people with varying levels of sexual experience might feel able to discuss their views about something 'so personal to them' as 'good sex'.

These encounters during the exploratory stage of the research contributed to a shift in my research focus and to the kinds of theoretical and methodological questions I wanted to pursue. I wanted to take seriously the idea that sexual experience could be a resource for learning, understanding and talking about sexual pleasure and to explore how sexual experience could be employed as a 'resource' in research contexts to generate insights into young people's sexual cultures and values. As detailed in my methodology chapter, this evolving interest in creating 'safe spaces' for exploring sexual experience became central to the method of data collection and analysis employed.

As well as taking seriously the comments made by the young people I met during the exploratory stage and examining the concept of sexual experience as a resource for sexual learning, I also wanted to 'trouble' this account (Lather 2000: 289) and to unsettle the straightforward relationship between sexual learning, sexual knowledge and sexual experience that the young men had asserted with such confidence. As Joan Scott argues, 'what counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always political' (1992: 37). Scott critiques the ways in which female experience has been valorised with particular traditions of feminist research, suggesting that taking experience 'as the origin of knowledge' is problematic since it makes the individual subject 'the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built' leaving aside critical examination of the ways in which 'experience' is constructed through language and ideological systems and categories of representation (1992: 25). Scott makes the case for a post-structuralist approach to 'experience', arguing that we need to unpick assumptions about the relationship between the subject, experience and knowledge through focusing on processes of identity production and insisting on the discursively constructed, political nature of experience (1992: 37).

Post-structuralist approaches and associated discursive methodologies have been critiqued by those who argue that they lead to a kind of 'discourse reductionism' that fails to take into account the multi-modal, embodied and sensory nature of lived experience (i.e. Brown et al 2009). In her recent work on affect and emotion Margaret Wetherell (2012) cautions against positioning the study of affect and embodied experience in opposition to post-structuralist approaches or as the solution to the problems that discursive approaches can create. Wetherell argues instead that in order to conduct empirical work in this area, we need a theory of discursive *and* affective practices.

Prior to conducting exploratory and pilot group work with young people I had intended to conduct my empirical work using a range of methods to map out the resources that young people were using to understand and learn about 'good sex'. I imagined these 'resources' as material objects, digital images, songs, games and education and relationship practices. I also imagined these resources to be a series of public discourses of sexuality and sexual pleasure that young people could employ in negotiating their sexual practices and identities (Thomson 2000b: 180) and in making sense of what counts as good and bad sex. As a researcher I imagined myself as a collector of these material and discursive resources and hoped to create spaces within which I could offer a selection of these for young people to discuss and interrogate. My increasing interest in exploring young people's experiences of sexual pleasure and the ways in which past experiences were employed as resources for negotiating meanings about 'good sex' did not signify a 'turn' away from this interest in discursive resources, but rather an additional interest in exploring sexual experience as a resource in itself that is configured through a series of affective and discursive practices. In her recent work on affect Wetherell (2012) uses the concept of 'affective practice' as a way of 'folding together' embodied experience, meaning making and discursive practices within social and material contexts. For Wetherell this is an approach that enables researchers to explore processes of 'embodied meaning making' within empirical data in a way that recognises both the social patterns in process as well as the possibility of doing otherwise.

As detailed in the following chapters of this thesis, I have found Wetherell's work on 'affective practice', along with other theoretical tools outlined in this chapter, useful for making sense of the data and addressing the research questions that

are summarised below. Wetherell's work was of course published in 2012, two years after the period of pilot work that shifted my thinking and created space for these theoretical ideas, pointing to the iterative way in which the research questions and research findings have taken shape, informed both through my early experiences at the beginning of my research journey and my continual engagement with new and old literature that I (re)discovered along the way.

Conclusion: Research aims, research questions and thesis summary

This chapter has outlined four transitions that have occurred over the course of my doctoral study and has situated these shifts within broader socio-historical processes and debates about social change and continuity in relation to young people's sexual cultures. In providing reflexive accounts of my personal and research journeys I have set up key theoretical approaches that I return to throughout the thesis, illustrating the ways in which they have informed my research design and methods of data analysis. In doing so the chapter sets up key concepts and lines of enquiry that can be summarised in the following research aims:

1. To explore and document meanings, values and experiences of 'good sex' and sexual pleasure in young people's sexual cultures in one geographic location and to use these empirical findings to contribute critically to the debates about the potential inclusion of pleasure in sex education and sexual health agendas.

2. To explore possible methods for researching young people and sexual pleasure and to consider the implications of these methodological findings for practice.

In order to address these aims I have formulated the following research questions:

1. How do young people understand and experience 'good sex' and sexual pleasure and what resources do they draw on to make sense of these understandings and experiences in the context of their everyday lives and experiences?

2. What methodological approaches and tools can be used to carry out ethical and productive research on sexual pleasure with young people?

3. How can the research contribute to debates about the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health and education work with young people?

    o Should pleasure be included in sexual health work and education with young people and what might be a useful model for moving forwards?

    o How can the research contribute to developing ethical practice in youth sexuality work around sexual pleasure?

In the following chapter I outline the body of work that calls for the inclusion of sexual pleasure in sexual health and sex education work with young people, picking up on the debates about change and continuity in young people's sexual cultures outlined above and engaging critically with the literature on the 'pleasure project' to raise questions that inform my discussion in the subsequent data chapters.

This is followed by my methodology chapter, which develops the arguments set out above, and provides an overview of the theoretical debates that frame my research methodology and decision to adopt a multi-method, reflexive research

design. This chapter also introduces the London borough within which the research is located and describes the participant samples and methods of data collection and analysis used at each stage of the research.

The three subsequent data chapters follow my research journey through three stages of fieldwork with each chapter reporting on the method used at each stage. In this way the thesis is structured according to a temporal research journey starting in this introductory chapter. Structuring the data chapters in this way enables me to address both research aims together and to consider what it is possible to know about young people's sexual cultures using three methods of data collection – survey, focus group and interview – and to use different methods of data analysis in each chapter to ask overlapping, but distinct research questions.

In the final chapter of the thesis I draw the insights from each of these chapters together and consider what it is possible to know about young people's sexual lives and cultures from this more dynamic and multi-dimensional approach (Mason 2006a). Here I provide a reflective account of the different methods used in the research in order to address the second research aim and consider the implications of the research for future researchers/practitioners. I conclude by considering the contribution of the research to debates about whether and how sexual pleasure might be included in sex education and youth sexual health research, policy and practice agendas.

Chapter 2: The Pleasure Project

There are a number of compelling arguments as to why sexual pleasure should be included and prioritised in the delivery of sexual health services for young people (Fine 1988, Holland & Ramazanoglu 1992, Holland et al. 1998, Aggleton & Campbell 2000, Coveney & Bunton 2003, Allen 2004, Allen 2005a, Hirst 2004, Ingham 2005, Philpott et al. 2006, Beasley 2008, Knerr 2008, Maxwell et al. 2009, SCHIVSH 2009, Carmody 2005, 2009, Watney 1980, Harrison et al 1996). Broadly, these arguments suggest that foregrounding the emotional and physical pleasures of sex and relationships and grounding youth sexual health initiatives in positive, holistic and rights based models of sexuality increase young people's capacity to have safe, enjoyable and consensual sexual experiences.

In this chapter I summarise the key arguments why sexual pleasure should be included in sexual health and education programmes for young people, drawing on two key bodies of literature that I suggest are relevant to these debates. First I examine a body of feminist scholarship that has for over two decades argued that there is a 'missing discourse of (female) desire' (Fine 1988) in sex education programmes and that calls for its inclusion in the curriculum as a way of challenging limited gendered discourses of (hetero)sexuality. Secondly I outline a body of public health research that documents the absence of pleasure from sexual health programming and HIV/AIDS education and argues that its inclusion could have 'health-promoting potential' (UNESCO 2007). In each section I situate these arguments historically in order to examine the ways in which the 'pleasure project' has been used to respond to evolving political, popular and academic agendas in relation to sexuality, gender and youth.

The feminist pleasure project

In this section I trace the genealogy of the feminist pleasure project and set up key theoretical ideas that I return to throughout the thesis. My focus is on two landmark studies in the field– Michelle Fine's (1988) ethnographic study of a US public school in the early 1980s and her concept of the 'missing discourse of (female) desire' and the WRAP and MRAP studies of young people's sexual relationships in the UK in the late 1980s and their concept of 'the male in the head' (Holland et al 1998).

Both studies were carried out during a time of intense public and political interest in sexuality in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the early 1980s (Weeks 2000) and during a time of vigorous feminist debate about female sexuality and whether it was possible for women to exercise sexual agency within a social and economic context of inequality, victimisation and 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1980, MacKinnon 1983, Vance 1984, Hollibaugh 1984; Snitow et al.1983). I use these studies to illustrate the different ways in which empirical work with young people has been used to document the absence of female pleasure from dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality and to bring young people's voices and desires into highly politicised debates about sexual risk-taking and sexual violence. In my discussion I use these studies to set up the rationale for the feminist pleasure project before moving on to consider how these debates have been taken been taken up over the past twenty five years in relation to changing political, cultural and theoretical landscapes.

Michelle Fine: The missing discourse of female desire

> A genuine discourse of desire would invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs, and limits. Such a discourse would release females from a position of receptivity, enable an analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure, and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators (Fine 1988: 33).

Twenty-five years ago, Michelle Fine used her ethnographic study of young people in New York High Schools to argue that there was a 'missing discourse of desire' in the US public education system (1988). In this influential article, Fine offers an analysis of the public discourses of sexuality that she suggests characterised debates about sex education in the United States, summarised as *sex as violence, sex as victimisation, sex as individual morality* and the *discourse of desire*. Fine argues that whilst the first three discourses are in abundance in US secondary schools, the fourth is 'missing' from the 'official' sex education curricula and from sex education classrooms. Fine argues that this framing of sexuality around reproduction and the risks of male sexual violence and disease, means that young women are educated as 'potential *victims* of sexual (male) desire' (1988:42), encouraged to say 'no' to sex and protect themselves from its potentially harmful consequences rather than explore and understand their sexual bodies and desires.

Although the 'discourse of desire' seldom appeared in US school classrooms, Fine found that it frequently emerged in her conversations with her young female participants – 'drop outs' from a public high school. Fine argues that for her female

participants 'sexual victimization and desire coexist' to produce sexual meanings and experiences that defy the victimisation thesis, giving examples such as Betty who states, 'I don't be needin a man who won't give me no pleasure but take my money and expect me to take care of him '(Fine 1988:35, Fine and Mcpherson 1994, Segal 1994). In the context of social ambivalence about female desire that separates the female sexual agent from the female sexual victim however, Fine argues that young women need access to 'safe spaces' to explore their desires and to develop a subject position from which they can negotiate the pleasures *and* dangers that they face (Vance 1984). Without access to these spaces to develop an empowered sexual subjectivity, Fine argues young women are more vulnerable to unwanted or unsafe sexual activity and sexual violence (Fine 1988, Holland et al 1998).

Introducing a 'genuine discourse of desire' in sexuality education Fine argues, in a much quoted passage, would enable young women and young men to 'explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs, and limits. Such a discourse would release females from a position of receptivity, enable an analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure, and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators' (Fine 1988: 33). Whilst Fine is clear that feminist intervention in sex education practices is no substitute for social and economic development, she argues that public schools in the US could play a key role in the construction of a female 'social and sexual' subject.

In her later work Fine has continued to emphasise the importance of publically funded services and social conditions to enable young women to express their sexual desires and develop healthy and empowered sexual subjectivities in safe

and supportive contexts (Fine and McClelland 2006). In her work with Sara McClelland she has conceptualised this as a theory of 'thick desire' placing greater emphasis on the socially 'enabling conditions' required for young women to articulate their sexual desires, rather than on what can be spoken in school classrooms and sex education curricula (Fine and McClelland 2006). In her more recent reflections on these debates, which are further discussed below, Fine has expressed some doubt about US public schools as potential sites for critical education, arguing that she is 'growing agnostic' about whether it is possible to 'wedge' pleasure into such 'constricted' public spaces (Fine 2005: 55). Fine remains passionate however about the need to create spaces for young women to explore and articulate their desires and develop empowered female sexual subjectivities, suggesting that rather than within public schools, the place for this work is within the 'diaspora of conversation, organising, social movements, opportunities for talk and activism [that] have progressed radically over the past 15 years' (Fine 2005). In her more recent work with Maria Elena Torre and a team of youth participatory youth researchers (Torre et al 2008), Fine has argued that it is possible to create politically and intellectually charged spaces or 'contact zones' through participatory youth research projects that work across/beyond the boundaries of 'official' school spaces and curriculum.

WRAP / MRAP: The Male in the Head

The Women, Risk and AIDS Project (WRAP) and the Men, Risk and AIDS Project (MRAP) constituted the first large scale qualitative investigation of young people's (16-21) heterosexual relationships and practices in the UK. The research was conducted by a team of feminist researchers who examined the part played by gendered power relations in the social construction of heterosexuality and the

practice of heterosexual sex. In their analysis of nearly 200 interviews the researchers compared young women's accounts of sexual risk-taking with those of young men to document the ways in which regulatory conventions of heterosexuality privilege male sexual pleasure and silence female desire (Holland et al 1998). Further the researchers documented the ways in which these asymmetrical conventions of heterosexual masculinity and femininity powerfully contributed to sexual risk taking and the instability of safer sexual practices, arguing that they produce femininity as an *unsafe* sexual identity (Holland et al 1998).

> To be conventionally feminine is to appear sexually unknowing, to aspire to a relationship, to let sex 'happen', to trust to love and to make men happy. Safe sex is not just a question of using protection, avoiding penetration, or being chaste, it brings questions of power, trust and female agency into sexual relationships (Holland, et al. 1998).

The researchers use the term 'male in the head' to refer to the way that the power of male dominated heterosexuality works through discourse, language, beliefs, identities and embodied practices to shape and constrain young men's and young women's sexual relationships and identities (Holland et al 1998: 22-23). For young women, it is not necessarily the 'male in the bed' that restricts or confines their experiences of pleasure or puts their safety at risk, but the 'male in the head' that they are actively involved in constituting and sometimes resisting. In the various outputs from these projects (See Holland et al 1998 for summary of publications) the researchers provide examples of young men and young women engaging in this construction and being regulated by it in different, unequal ways. These examples show that in sharp contrast to young men's largely positive sexual

experiences, the majority of young women who participated in the study reported limited experiences of pleasure as well as limited *expectations* of the potential for female sexual pleasure in their heterosexual encounters (Holland et al 1998: 39).

As in Fine's work, the concept of female 'empowerment' is central to the WRAP team's analysis of how some young women are able to ensure their own safety and sexual pleasure in heterosexual encounters. In their analysis of young women's experiences of empowerment, the researchers distinguish between *intellectual empowerment* - the knowledge, expectations and intentions that young women bring to a sexual encounter, and *experiential empowerment* which happens at the level of actual sexual practice and suggest that both are required for young women to negotiate safe and pleasurable sexual experiences. The researchers found that although some young women in the WRAP study were able to gain control in their sexual encounters, these experiences were 'context-specific', meaning that women were able to gain control in some sexual encounters and with some sexual partners, but not with others (Holland et al 1998).

The WRAP and MRAP research projects offer a framework for understanding the social construction of sexual pleasure within the context of asymmetrical, regulatory and institutional conventions of heterosexuality and the unequal gender relations that it produces. Writing in the 1990s in the context of fierce debates about the politics of sex education (Thomson 1994) the team used the findings from the WRAP/MRAP studies to support Michelle Fine's notion of a 'missing discourse of (female) desire' in sex education and to argue for 'radical changes to sex education and contraceptive advice giving' that would include educating young men about the social construction of masculinity and supporting young women to

develop a sense of self worth that is allied to their shifting sexual needs and desires, including that of requiring sexual pleasure (Holland et al 1993: 281).

Based on their analysis of the ways in which gendered power works in highly institutionalised and regulatory ways, the team of researchers are clear that female sexual empowerment, safety and pleasure will not be achieved through encouraging individual women to be more assertive, but through a collective challenge to the ways in which men and women are socially constituted as sexual subjects. For the WRAP team this involves treating female sexual pleasure as a priority and replacing 'a passive, disembodied femininity with a positive female sexual identity' similar to Fine's vision of a 'genuine discourse of desire' (Holland et al 1992: 280).

> A positive feminine sexuality would encompass the heterogeneity of female desire and experience and would enable women and men to recognise and express the contradictions of their own experiences and responsibilities. This would provide a much firmer grounding for safer sex than that which is generally available at present (Holland et al 1992 279).

In the two decades since the first publications of the WRAP research, feminist researchers have continued to document the ways in which young people, in particular women, are actively engaged in constructing their gender and sexual identities within the context of unequal social relations (See Renold and Ringrose 2008, 2011, Maxwell 2006, 2007, Maxwell and Aggleton 2012a, Stewart 1999, Chung 2005, Allen 2003). Much of this research looks at young people's, in particular young women's, 'resistance' or 'contestation' of normative, hegemonic gender regimes and their engagement with 'alternative' sex and gender practices

and discourses (i.e. Maxwell 2006, 2007, Renold and Ringrose 2008, Allen 2003) As Claire Maxwell and Peter Aggleton (2012b) reflect concepts of agency remain central to this project and its attempt to describe the forms of action that young women take in order to win freedom from and within prevailing social relations.

25 years on – is the discourse of (female) desire still missing?

> We now believe that the missing discourse of desire hasn't been missing at all. (McClelland and Fine 2008: 96-7)

Since the publication of Michelle Fine's article over twenty years ago feminist scholars have continued to document the absence of desire from health and education programmes and call for its inclusion in work with young people in a range of national contexts (Lees 1986, 1994, Lenskyi 1990, Thompson 1990, 1995, Tolman 1994, 2002, Allen 2001, 2004, 2005a, 2008, Beasley 2008, Carmody 2009, Kiely 2006, Casale and Nanass-Hancock 2011, Hirst 2008, Fine and McClelland 2007, Bay-Cheng 2003, Connell 2005, Thompson 1990,1995, Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994; Holland et al.1994). This work has focused primarily on the absence of female sexual desire from sex education programmes, but has also documented the absence of non-heterosexual desire (Harrison et al 1996, Rasmussen 2004, Allen 2007) and the absence of discourses of masculine desire that imagine male pleasure in diverse, holistic and equitable ways (Beasley 2008, Allen 2004, 2005a, 2007a). More recently a number of feminist scholars have reflected critically on this call within the current historical moment highlighting a number of concerns about its potential to have unintended, and potentially harmful consequences, as I further discuss below (Lamb 2010, Allen and Carmody 2012, Tolman 2012, Lamb and Peterson 2011, Fine 2005a, Harris 2005).

Much of this work continues to draw on social constructionist and post-structuralist approaches to gender and sexuality to map the discourses of sexuality that are constructed in education programmes and to highlight the role of educational institutions in constructing power/knowledge about sexuality (Foucault 1980, Allen 2001) that has consequences for how young people construct and experience their sexual identities and engage in sexual practice. In her work on sexual violence prevention programmes in Australia for example, Moira Carmody (2005, 2009) has documented the absence of female sexual pleasure from education programmes and argued for an alternative approach to sexual violence prevention work that 'provides the space to acknowledge both pleasure and danger in sexual intimate relations and [...] the multiple and dynamic nature of sexual negotiation' (Carmody 2005: 466). Drawing on Foucault, Carmody has developed the concept of 'sexual ethics' to imagine sexual pleasure in relational terms, arguing that for sex to be ethical it must involve mutual pleasure and care for the self and the other, by both parties. For either of these to be missing from a sexual relationship, Carmody argues 'tips the balance from mutual pleasure to dangerous sex either physically or emotionally' (Carmody 2005: 477). As well as publishing several articles and a monograph on her approach to 'sexual ethics', Carmody has also provided a resource for practitioners that provides the lesson plans and teaching resources required to deliver the 10 week sexual ethics programme that she has developed and put into practice in Australia.

One of the most prolific writers on young people and sexual pleasure since the publication of Fine's article and the WRAP/MRAP projects is Louisa Allen whose work builds on both these studies (Allen 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005a, 2007, 2008, Allen and Carmody 2012). As part of her doctoral studies Louisa Allen explored

what she has termed the 'knowledge/practice gap' between what young people

(16-19) in New Zealand learn in schools and what they do in practice (Allen 2001,

2005a). The young women and men who participated in Allen's study were highly

critical of the sexuality education that they received because of its de-eroticised

content and the ways in which this conflicted with their own relationships and the

way that they saw these relationships represented in the media. In a subsequent

research project Allen conducted a survey of 1180 students to ask young people

what kind of information they would like included in sexuality programmes and

found that the topic survey respondents most wanted to know more about was

how to make sex enjoyable for both partners (Allen 2008).

Allen has argued that one way of closing the knowledge/practice gap and meeting

young people's 'persistent and vociferous calls' for 'information about pleasure and

desire' might be to include a 'discourse of erotics' in sexuality education (Allen and

Carmody 2012:457, Allen 2005a). Drawing on a post-structuralist framework that

constitutes young people as active and productive social agents, Allen suggests

that including 'a discourse of erotics' in sexuality education programmes would

create 'spaces in which young people's sexual desire and pleasure can be

legitimated, positively integrated and deemed common place (Allen 2004: 152). At

the same time it would create opportunities for young people to develop embodied

sexual knowledge, for example about bodily responses, the logistics of bodily

engagement in sexual activity and insight into which pleasurable activities are

high/low risk (2004: 152).

Building on Michelle Fine's call for the inclusion of a 'discourse of (female) desire'

Allen argues that a 'discourse of erotics' could offer young women *and* young men

more diverse and nuanced understandings of themselves as gendered sexual

subjects. Allen argues that although young men's (hetero)sexual desire and pleasure appear to be given more space in some sexuality education programmes, their desire is insinuated in information about 'wet dreams' and 'erections' and framed in a heteronormative discourse of 'growing up' and becoming interested in 'the opposite sex' (2005a; 150). Allen suggests that this discourse of awakening male (hetero)sexual desire has regulatory, prescriptive effects for young men and that in the absence of an equivalent reference to young women's desire, it constitutes young men as predatory sexual subjects.

As Allen suggests (2005a), her argument for including a 'discourse of erotics' in sexuality education is the start of a 'conversation' rather than an account of what this discourse might look like in the context of classroom practices, educational resources or teacher-student relationships. Arguably it is Allen's methodological papers and creative, visual methods that offer some more tangible suggestions of how to engage young people in questions of sexuality, erotics and pleasure. These include 'pleasure sheets' that ask young people to identify different pleasurable experiences that they have encountered (Allen 2005a) and visual projects that ask young people to take photographs of where they learn about sex and sexuality (2009, 2011a, 2011b). As in Fine's landmark 1988 paper however, there is a lack of attention in Allen's work to how these discursive maps for personal and social change might play out in the highly regulatory and normative contexts of youth peer groups, educational institutions and classroom practices (see Ingham 2005). In many ways, this 'gap' between the theory and practice of the feminist pleasure project is the starting point for this study which focuses on methods of engaging young people in conversations about sexual pleasure and examines how understandings of sex, pleasure and desire play out in different situated research contexts.

No longer missing: Sexualisation and the commodification of (female) desire

In the two decades since the publication of Fine's work and the WRAP and MRAP studies political struggles over young people's sexualities have shifted from anxieties about the role of the state and the sex education curriculum (for example the fiercely contested debates about the introduction of 'Section 28'[2]) to concerns about the role of the market in 'sexualising' young people through their engagement with digital technologies, popular media and commercial spaces (Holland and Thomson 2010, See Gill 2009, Attwood 2006, 2007, 2009, Kehily 2012). As Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith (2011) note, the portrayal of young people's, in particular young women's, sexuality as endangered by media is 'a very old one' (235) and the recent rise in media coverage and government intervention in this field can be seen as part of an increasingly vocal 'tradition of suspicion' towards media technologies, sex and young people (Attwood and Smith 2011, Kehily 2012, McNair 2002, Egan and Hawkes 2008, Weeks 2007).

Contemporary feminist scholarship on the 'missing' discourse of female desire reflects these shifting concerns, as US scholars in particular engage with the contested debates around 'sexualisation' and consider the significance of this changing media and cultural landscape for the potential inclusion of pleasure and desire in research and educational agendas (Fine 2005, Harris 2005, Lamb 2010, Lamb and Peterson 2011, Tolman 2012). In her contribution to a journal special

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[2] Section 28 was an amendment to the Local Government Act 1988, which was intended to prevent the 'promotion' of homosexuality as an 'acceptable' 'pretended family relationship' within schools (Crown Copyright, 1988). It was eventually repealed in 2003, after a failed attempt to repeal it in 2000.

issue reflecting on Michelle Fine's 1988 article '15 years on', Anita Harris (2005) situates the feminist youth agenda concerned with enabling young women to speak out about their sexual desires, in the contemporary context of sexualisation, digitalisation and post-feminist politics. Drawing on a key insight from Michel Foucault's work that regulation and oppression can occur not only though shutting down voices but through evoking them, Harris argues that the feminist project of eliciting female discourses of desire has been problematised by the ways in which discourses of female desire have been mobilised and commodified to regulate young women and to produce a particular kind of new female citizen.

Reflecting on Michelle Fine's paper '15 years on', Harris (2005) argues the discourse of female desire is no longer missing. She suggests that in the contemporary global consumer economy an apparently 'new found sassiness and sexual autonomy' can now be spoken through a range of popular forums including fashion and television shows, to music and books' (2005: 40).

> This is a world of Lara Croft and Buffy the Vampire Slayer; bra tops and hot pants for pre-teens and, for older girls, clothes that encourage the proud display of round bellies and curvaceous buttocks; commercial books for and about young women entitled Promiscuities, The Ethical Slut, Fast Girls, Cunt, Clit Notes, Slut! and Going All The Way; and sexually confident young pop stars such as Britney Spears, Destiny's Child and Christina Aguilera (Harris 2005: 40) .

Harris, like others writing about contemporary girlhood and 'post-feminist', neoliberal culture (Aapola et al 2005, Gill 2011, McRobbie 2009, Ringrose 2012, Gill and Scharff 2011) argues that the feminist message that women are sexual

subjects has become bound up with the neoliberal message that autonomy is expressed through consumer choice (Harris 2005: 40). Harris argues that in this new media and consumer landscape the expression of young women's sexual desire is linked to a consumer lifestyle that enables young women to present themselves as both a desiring subject and a desirable product. In this new economy of desire young women are constituted as consumer citizens - desiring subjects of a (hetero)sexual consumer culture of which they in turn become desired products and objects of (Harris 2005). As Harris and many others have noted (see below) these new discourses of desire and female sexuality reproduce many elements of hegemonic heterosexual relations in a media economy that is profoundly heteronormative, ageist and (dis)ablist (Gill 2011).

Harris's work forms part of the emerging field of 'girl studies' that has sought to document how girls feature in 'the changing landscape of late modernity (Nayak and Kehily 2008; 59). Feminist researchers working within this field have documented the emergence of new discourses of 'girl power' (Appola et al 2005) and new forms of femininity that celebrate freedom, pleasure and fun (Kehily 2008, Hermes 1995, McRobbie 1996). Terms such as 'post-feminism' and 'new femininities' have been used to describe what is distinctive about contemporary gender relations and to capture the myriad of contradictions in these new discourses of female sexual empowerment, pleasure and choice that seem to rework and reconfigure familiar binaries and inequalities in complex ways.

In her work Ros Gill (2008, 2009, 2011) has documented the emergence of a new female 'active, desiring heterosexy subject' that Gill suggests is difficult to read and open to polarised readings. In making sense of this complex new sexual landscape Gill has drawn on the Foucaultian notion of 'technologies of the self'

(Foucault 1988) and Hilary Radner's (1993, 1999) concept of the 'technology of sexiness' to describe the ways in which this new female subject is compulsorily required to perform her desire and desirability and display 'technologies of sexiness'. Gill argues that for this new female subject power and value are no longer derived from an apparent sexual innocence but from her 'bodily capital, sexual skills', and appropriately "made over" sexual subjectivity ' (Gill 2011; 56, Gill 2008).

Using an analysis of the contemporary reality TV show *The Sex inspectors*, Ros Gill and Laura Harvey identify the ways in which both (adult) men and women are called on to become 'enterprising sexual subjects', but argue that these discourses of self-management and success are differentiated in highly gendered ways.

> Women are exhorted to become 'sexual entrepreneurs' (Harvey and Gill [2011a]) able to present as 'appropriately' desirable and desiring and willing to perform a number of practices previously associated with the sex industry (e.g. pole dancing in the bedroom, engaging in a threesome) to keep their men happy and turned on. Men, by contrast are urged to learn the 'science' of 'efficient' sex. These gendered performances are presented simultaneously as moments of freedom, choice, empowerment and pleasure, yet also as hard work that is normatively demanded and essential to the success of heterosexual relationships (Harvey and Gill 2011b: 488).

Within this new economy failure is constituted as not having orgasms, not being able to 'last', having 'boring' or 'predictable' sex or worst of all, not wanting to have sex at all (Harvey and Gill 2011b). These examples of 'bad sex' are seen as leading to the ultimate breakdown of the couple relationship and the basis for the

reality TV show that bring in 'sex inspectors' to help couples improve their bad sex lives. Harvey and Gill's analysis suggests that a hybrid of discourses of sexual liberation, female empowerment and self-management are operating within popular culture to create new discourses of 'good' and 'bad' sex and new gendered sexual subjectivities. This analysis raises questions that I return to throughout this thesis, about how these contradictory, regulatory gendered discourses of 'great sex' play out in young people's sexual cultures and sexual relationships.

Sharon Lamb (2010) has suggested that the new female subject emerging from the contemporary media landscape who she descries as 'the power porn sexualised female' (300) may be 'ironically similar' to the 'idealized' teen girl who is imagined in feminist writings on the inclusion of pleasure and desire in sexuality education – 'the kind of sexual person who feels pleasure, desire and subjectivity' (296). In a recent critique of the feminist pleasure project, Lamb (2010) warns feminist researchers against using sexual desire as a way of revealing identity, critiquing theorists such as Fine (1988) and Tolman (1994) for depicting female desire as a naturalised force that needs to be uncovered and treasured by young women (and 'savvy interviewer[s]', Lamb 2010: 302) to avoid its suppression or exploitation by others.

Lamb's critique of 'feminist ideals for a healthy female adolescent sexuality' (2010) has sparked a debate in the Journal of Sex Roles with Zoe Peterson and Deborah Tolman, about the nature and place of desire in feminist research agendas and theoretical work on female sexuality (Lamb 2010, Lamb and Peterson 2011, Tolman 2011, See also Allen and Carmody 2012). These debates highlight the lack of consensus in contemporary feminist writings on what counts as

'empowerment', 'agency', 'desire' and 'pleasure' and the difficulties of finding a language for these concepts in the face of a media economy that seems to have borrowed and appropriated feminist languages in highly contradictory ways (McRobbie 2009, Aapola et al 2005).

Anita Harris (2005) argues that within this contemporary context the feminist pleasure project needs a renewed emphasis on the concept of 'safe spaces' that Michelle Fine originally put forward in her 1988 article. Harris argues that adopting this focus would enable feminist researchers to identify 'how and where some young women articulate desire for themselves' and to explore the ways in which discourses of desire can be appropriated and misused (Harris 2005:39). In her own work, Harris has documented the ways in which internet websites and magazines can function as safe spaces within which young women can 'name and claim their sexuality and talk back to the colonizing of their desires for the agendas of the state, the economy and the private sector' (2005: 42, 2001, 2004). Harris's work suggests that these are spaces in which young women are able to engage in unregulated debate with each other and generate their own meanings about sexual desire. For Harris these are sites of creativity, play and resistance, 'free and safe spaces' within which young women can speak together about sexuality beyond the regulatory gaze of adults, the state and commercial interests.

Anita Harris's argument serves as a reminder of the need to focus on young people's voices in the midst of intergenerational debates about changing political, technological, cultural and feminist landscapes and to look for new ways of capturing young people's experiences within this complex moral terrain. Further, her work suggests, as Fine (2005) has also argued, that the location of these sites for exploring pleasure and desire may not be located within institutional schooling.

In the final chapter of this thesis I return to this question to consider whether it is possible to create 'free' and 'safe', critical and 'queer' spaces for exploring sexual pleasure in different kinds of online and offline, peer and professional, institutional and community contexts.

A way forwards?: Pleasure as a site of possibility

> The fact that we cannot know what a discourse of pleasure might do in advance opens it as a site of perpetual creation and recreation and therefore (sexual) possibility (Allen and Carmody 2012: 464).

In their contribution to the recent 'critical pause' in debates about the inclusion of pleasure in sexuality education Louisa Allen and Moira Carmody (2012) reflect on their earlier work calling for the inclusion of pleasure in sexuality and anti-violence education programmes for young people and raise questions about the potential for such an approach to have unintended regulatory affects. The authors emphasise the distinction between opening up a discursive space in which young people might have a right to sexual pleasure and the 'pleasure imperative' – the insistence that young people *must* experience pleasure. Drawing on insights from the post-structuralist approaches employed by both authors, Allen and Carmody note that the nature of discourse means that individuals do not exert control over how it operates in different contexts, so that in circulating a 'discourse of erotics' (or 'ethical erotics', Carmody 2005), it may become 'untethered from its original intentions' (2012: 460, Fine 2005: 57).

In their reflections, Allen and Carmody are critical of Allen's original feminist investments in the transformative potential of pleasure and in her framing of the 'discourse of erotics' in a concept of social and sexual justice. In developing their

critique Allen and Carmody draw on the work of queer theorists Jagose (2010) and Talburt (2009) to argue that harnessing pleasure to political intentions undermines its transformative potential. They suggest that in the case of Louisa Allen's work the binding pleasure to political aims for social/sexual justice or to feminist aspirations for young women's sexual empowerment eradicates the transformative potential of sexual pleasure and puts pleasure to work with unanticipated regulatory effects.

Allen and Carmody's reflections on their earlier work highlight the difficulties of including pleasure in regulatory institutional spaces, but unlike Fine (2005) the authors remain committed to the project of including pleasure in school based sexuality education. Allen and Carmody suggest that what is required in sexuality education is not a standardised or regulatory set of ideas about what pleasure is, but a concept of pleasure as a 'site of possibility' and resistance, with transformative and radical potential (2012: 459). To develop this concept theoretically the authors draw on the suggestion in Foucault's work that pleasure has more transformative potential than desire because desire is tied to identity, expressed *for someone* or *for some act* in a way that reveals 'what one really wants, who one really is' (Davidson 2001: 211-2). Pleasure on the other hand, is an event 'outside of the subject', or at the limit of the subject, in something which is neither of the body nor of the assignable' (*ibid.*). For Allen and Carmody, it is this capacity of pleasure to be disruptive and un-assignable that makes it potentially useful for creating educational spaces for imagining sexuality in ways that are not bound by limited heteronormative gender and sexual identities (2012: 463-4, Rabinow 1997: 268).

The fact that we cannot know what a discourse of pleasure might do in

advance opens it as a site of perpetual creation and recreation and therefore (sexual) possibility. As long as this discourse has a presence in sexuality education, the potential for young people to mobilise and negotiate it in ways that make sense for them remains [...] Of course, recognising this capacity means relinquishing a sense of false control over how pleasure is remade and recreated. However, our research has taught us that young people have significantly more capacity for transformative sexual possibilities than they are usually given credit for. (Allen and Carmody 2012: 464)

Allen and Carmody's critical reflections on their previous work offer an exploration of some of the tensions between queer and feminist conceptualizations of pleasure and consider some of the implications of this for sexuality education work with young people. The authors' recognition of the limitations of existing feminist discursive approaches and their argument that we need a 'queering of pleasure' rather than a 'teaching for pleasure' provide a useful contribution to the literature (see also Britzman 2010 [1995]). Their argument is limited however by a lack of attention to how young people and educators might 'mobilise and negotiate' such disruptive spaces within the institutional contexts in which they suggest it should have a presence. Although the authors note that 'the queer notion of pleasure as a site of possibility is not easily reconciled with the regulatory practices of schooling (Allen and Carmody 2012: 465) they do not develop this argument further. In this way their paper raises, rather than addresses, a number of difficult and productive questions about how to *operationalise* the queer concept of pleasure as a 'site of possibility' pleasure within the regulatory practices of schooling and how to *reconcile* the concept with feminist investments in ideas around female safety, empowerment and the experience of mutual or shared pleasure. What might be the risks of giving up on potentially regulatory feminist discourses of desire that

imagine heterosexual pleasure in terms of mutuality and equality? In what ways might it be possible for educators to create these kinds of disruptive and queer spaces without them being unintentionally regulated or shaped by the educators or the institution's moral values and political investments?

Allen and Carmody's argument also highlights an unresolved tension between young people's requests for 'information' about 'how to make sexual activity enjoyable' that Allen documented in her earlier work (Allen 2004, 2005a), and their own desire to create spaces within which pleasure is disruptive and un-assignable. Is it possible to give young people the information that they say they want about pleasure, whilst avoiding creating a 'pleasure imperative' that provides a recipe for how to give or gain pleasure? How can educators meet young people's needs for information and knowledge relating to sexual enjoyment, whilst also providing young people with access to disruptive, queer and critical discourses of sexuality? In the final chapter of this thesis I return to these questions, drawing on insights from the study to consider some of the challenges and possibilities for the feminist pleasure project within different institutional contexts and practice settings.

In this section of the chapter I have mapped the genealogy of the feminist pleasure project, outlining key theoretical ideas that I critically engage with throughout this thesis and observing the scarcity of literature that explores how discourses of pleasure, desire or erotics might translate into professional practices and institutional settings. In the following section of this chapter I outline a body of public health literature relating to 'sex-positive' approaches that draws explicitly on knowledge from activist and practitioner communities and outlines a number of strategies for including pleasure in sexual health and sex education practices. Bringing these two literatures together highlights the potential of top-down and

bottom-up approaches, both of which I suggest can offer tools for taking the pleasure project forward.

The public health pleasure project

> Throughout the world, too few young women and men, including those who are living with HIV, receive anything approaching adequate preparation for adult sexual life. In many HIV and AIDS curricula, discussion of sex is simply avoided or else the focus is placed, often exclusively, upon the potential negative consequences of sex. The positive values of sexual life, such as pleasure and reciprocity, are conspicuous in their absence, despite their health-promoting potential. (UNESCO 2007: 7)

There is now a significant body of work that documents the ways in which public health approaches to sexuality are overwhelmingly focused on risk, disease and the negative outcomes of sex, whilst avoiding discussion of positive outcomes and motivations for having sex such as pleasure, desire, intimacy, love or social relations and prestige (Ott et al 2006, Knerr and Philpott 2011, Aggleton and Campbell 2000, UNESCO 2007, Campbell and McPhail 2002). In relation to young people in particular it is argued that sex is linked in the public imagination and in official policy discourses not only to infection and disease but to sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy which are further linked to problems of social and economic exclusion (Aggleton and Campbell 2000). These different approaches to sexuality are sometimes characterised as *sex-negative* and *sex-positive* approaches. In the former approach pleasure is imagined as a barrier to achieving good public health outcomes and in need of social and state regulation to prevent the spread of infection and high fertility rates. In the latter, *sex positive* approach, however pleasure is conceptualised as a natural and integral aspect of sexuality and sexual practice and in need of understanding and nurture so that it can be developed and exercised in safe and respectful ways (Knerr and Philpott 2011).

Whereas sexual pleasure is central to feminist research agendas about young people's sexualities, in public health domains it is a marginalised research agenda leading to a scarcity of research literature on the topic (Ingham 2005). As several critical public health scholars have documented (Campbell and MacPhail 2002, Ingham 2005, Knerr and Philpott 2011), public health *research* agendas reflect public health *policy* agendas and have largely attempted to account for young people's sexuality largely in terms of 'risky behaviours' and negative sexual health outcomes such as sexually transmitted infections and unwanted teenage pregnancies. This has led to a lack of empirical work on young people's positive motivations for having sex and the pleasurable and erotic aspects of their sexual experience (Ott et al 2006, Marston and King 2006). When I reviewed the literature on young people and sexual pleasure at the start of my doctoral study in 2009, I found that whereas the research terms young people, sex and risk generated around 35,000 results in the Medline database, searching for young people, sex and pleasure generated only 863 results[3].

Although there is some anecdotal evidence suggesting that including pleasure in sexual health programmes can produce positive outcomes (Knerr and Philpott 2011), there is no research documenting that the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health programmes will (or will not) have 'health promoting potential' (UNESCO 2007, Ingham 2005, Knerr and Philpott 2011). Whilst the aim of my discussion is not to review the evidence for pleasure inclusion it is important to note that the scarcity of research in this area contributes to the ongoing challenges of delivering this work (Knerr and Philpott 2011). Wendy Knerr and Anne Philpott, who are involved in promoting and delivering *The Pleasure Project* internationally (see

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[3] The search terms were (adolescen* or young* or teen*) and sex and (pleasure or desire or erotic). The search was conducted on 01/07/2009.

below), argue for example that without evidence from rigorous control trials suggesting that pleasure approaches work, it can be difficult to mobilise investment for the kinds of HIV prevention 'pleasure projects' they have been involved in supporting and delivering (Knerr and Philpott 2011, Philpott and Knerr 2009, Philpott et al 2006. See Ingham 2007: 376 on controversies relating to using RCTs to evaluate SRE programmes).

Unlike the body of feminist literature outlined above, the literature reviewed here outlines a number of practical strategies for including pleasure in sexual health and education programmes, which I summarise as: (1) 'eroticising' condoms through incorporating languages of pleasure and desire in the marketing of condoms and the promotion of condom use through educational programmes and safer sex campaigns; (2) including discussion of pleasure in family planning interventions around contraceptive decision-making; (3) including discussion of non-penetrative sexual practices in sex education and safer sex campaigns as safe and pleasurable alternatives to penetrative sex. In the following section I provide further detail of these approaches through exploring some historic and current attempts to implement these strategies within particular communities and practice domains.

Pleasure profiling and family planning

In their overview of the research literature on sexual pleasure and contraceptive use Jenny Higgins and Jennifer Hirsch (2007, 2008) argue that whilst there is some literature suggesting that condom use may be linked to issues of pleasure and desire for heterosexual men and women and for men who have sex with men, there is a scarcity of research on how other types of contraception can affect

sexual enjoyment, especially for women. Higgins and Hirsch's own research (2007) with adult women in the US suggests that women's use of a range of contraceptives may be shaped by considerations of pleasure including factors such as a potential decrease or increase in libid.o, sensation, lubrication, vaginal wetness and sexual spontaneity. Their research also documented that although these factors were important to their participants' contraceptive decision making, they were not issues that the women reported ever being asked about by health practitioners. Drawing on these findings, Higgins and Hirsch argue that discussions about sexual pleasure need to be included in family planning interventions and advocate an approach that they term 'pleasure profiling' (2007: 136). This involves healthcare practitioners proactively asking women to talk about their preferences for wetter, dryer, 'natural' or more spontaneous sex in order to support them to make a decision about the best type of contraception to use (*ibid.*). Since most women stated that they would not feel comfortable initiating these conversations themselves, Higgins and Hirsch (2007) emphasise that training and culturally specific resources would be required to enable healthcare practitioners to initiate these conversations, for example as part of proactive sexual history taking.

Higgins and Hirsch also highlight the potential risks of 'pleasure promotion' within the context of existing gendered social inequalities and suggest that 'micro-level' changes to professional practices must be accompanied by (unspecified) initiatives to challenge social inequalities and gendered social norms (2007: 136). They suggest that without addressing issues of gender and power well-intentioned sexuality programmes could enforce existing gender norms in particular contexts, for example through exacerbating ideas about male privilege and right to extra-marital affairs, or through promoting notions of male performance and the

requirement to 'last' (*ibid.*). Even if proven effective, Higgins and Hirsch argue that the kinds of micro-level interventions that they advocate are limited in their capacity to address the broad socio-cultural forces that make pleasure seeking easier for men than for women, or those that limit women's sexual enjoyment by fuelling gender based violence and abuse (Higgins and Hirsch 2007, 2008, Holland et al 1992).

In this way their work highlights the synergies between the literature outlined here and the body of feminist work detailed above, both of which argue, with differing emphasis, that in order to increase sexual safety and enjoyment change is required at the micro-level of professional practice and the macro-level of gendered socio-economic relations. In bringing together these two bodies of literature in this thesis I aim to draw on the strengths and insights of both approaches.

Eroticising condoms

The Pleasure Project is a not-for profit organisation that promotes the 'eroticisation of safer sex' and the inclusion of pleasure and desire into sexual health interventions', particularly in the context of HIV prevention in high-risk, low-resourced areas (Knerr and Philpott 2011). The project has a number of outputs designed to communicate its argument for pleasure inclusion and the 'eroticisation' of condoms to academic and practitioner audiences, as well as to the general public and the erotic film industry. These outputs include training for health professionals in Cambodia, with UK film directors on how to include condoms in erotic films, conference papers and journal articles published in health journals such as *The Lancet* (2006) and *Reproductive Health Matters* (2006), a website

that promotes the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health work and contains tips on how to 'eroticise' condoms (for example by putting a condom on a partner's penis with your mouth) and *The Global Mapping of Pleasure,* a document that identifies 47 projects worldwide that 'put pleasure first in HIV prevention and sexual health promotion' and 'sexually provocative media that include safer sex.' (Knerr 2008, Philpott, Knerr and Boydell 2006, See Knerr and Philpott 2011 for a reflective overview of the projects work and outputs to date). This directory (Knerr 2008) is perhaps the most comprehensive list I have been able to identify of practical examples of how to 'eroticize safe sex' and reads as both a celebration of safe sexual pleasure in different cultural contexts and a practical guide offering ideas on how to incorporate sexual pleasure into safer sex messaging, promotional materials and community education programmes.

Research on young people's perceptions of condoms and condom use suggest that condoms are frequently associated with infection, dirt and a lack of trust in relationships, reducing the likelihood of young people using them (Measor 2006, Flood 2005, Hatherall et al 2005, MacPhail and Campbell 2001). Those writing about work at *The Pleasure Project* have used similar evidence relating to adult's perceptions of condoms in various cultural and national contexts to suggest that health educators and campaigners need to 'erotisicise' condoms and encourage people to see them as fun, sexy and pleasurable, transforming them 'from being strictly disease prevention and public health tools into erotic accessories' (Philpott, Knerr and Boydell 2006: 24).

Condom manufacturers have embraced this 'erotic' approach to condom promotion through incorporating languages of pleasure, desire and play into their condom branding. At the time of writing (January 2013) global condom

manufacturer *Durex* is marketing sixteen brands of condoms on its English language website, only one of which - *Durex Extra Safe* - uses the language of safety and risk. The other fifteen condom products with brand names such as - *Durex Sensation, Durex Pleasuremax Warming, Durex Tingle*, and *Durex Real Feel* - draw on languages of pleasure and sensuality to formulate a direct challenge to any suggestion that condoms might dim sensation and act as a barrier to the experience of sexual pleasure. Further, *Durex* markets its condoms alongside products such as sex toys, lubes, and massage gels, as well as links to online 'fun and games' and tips about how to increase your sexual enjoyment and 'achieve a more healthy and rewarding sex life' (Durex 2013a).

> You told us you wanted lubes that were more modern, less medical. Sexier – slinkier. We listened. And here they are [...] Now every touch can become a sensual touch [...] every moment filled with heightened sensitivity. Durex Play lubes don't just lubricate – they can warm, tingle and tantalise! (Durex 2013b)

Durex's 'sexier – slinkier' branding provides an example of the cross over between branding strategies that use pleasure to (literally) sell condoms and campaigns to 'eroticise' condoms in sexual health promotion work. This is explicitly acknowledged by Wendy Knerr and Anne Philpott (2011) at *The Pleasure Project* who argue that the project deliberately employs techniques used in advertising and marketing such as 'edgy and erotic language and images' in order 'make sexual health information more enticing' (Knerr and Philpott 2011).

In one of their outputs (Philpott at al 2006) the authors at *The Pleasure Project* raise a series of pertinent questions relating to the possible adverse affects of this

strategy such as the potential for increased discrimination or the creation of new pleasure norms and pressures. These questions receive limited critical discussion in any of the project's outputs however and it is not clear exactly from the project's work what counts as the 'eroticisation' of safer sex and how it differs (or if it needs to) from the kinds of 'sexy' marketing strategies employed by global condom manufactures such as *Durex*. Is the 'eroticisation' of condoms about making condoms more enticing, exciting and fun? Or does it involve challenging gendered social norms about pleasure and risk? What might be some of the limitations of this approach in the context of unequal sexual relationships that are shaped by gendered social inequalities and the power discrepancies inherent in commercial sexual relationships?

In as yet unpublished conference papers Jean Shoveller has engaged critically with these questions to consider some of the possible unintended and unwelcome consequences of including a discourse of pleasure in public health domains (2011a, 2011b). Shoveller draws on Foucauldian approaches to suggest that introducing pleasure into health policy and practice domains would lead to certain pleasures being sanctioned, privileged and promoted for the benefit of some institutions and groups and inevitably the harm of others. Shoveller asks whether in linking pleasure to the desired public health outcome of increasing safer sexual practices, we risk instrumentalising pleasure in the pursuit of safety and whether in the political rationalities of late modernity and neo-liberalism, this could turn sexual pleasure into one more technique by which we are required to make good 'choices'. Like Allen and Carmody's argument for the 'queering' of pleasure in sexuality education (2012), Shoveller's argument raises concerns about the potential unintended consequences of introducing a discourse of pleasure / desire / erotics into institutional contexts. Her argument differs however in that she

argues that whilst Foucault's ideas may be useful for breaking open the notion of 'ideal conduct' and exploring the legitimacy of a range of various pleasures, the translation of these theoretical concepts into regulatory public health practices could be highly problematic.

Non-penetrative sexual practices: safe and pleasurable

The eroticising of sexual health messages has been a well-developed strategy of safer sex promotion within the gay community for several decades, most notably in the 1980s in response to the HIV epidemic in the West (Paton 1985, Altman 1992, Watney 1988, 1990, Crimp 1988, Pearl 1990, Hogan 1996). When HIV and AIDS emerged in the UK in the 1980s, there was no concerted government response to the onset of the epidemic in the UK until 1986 when the government launched a massive public health campaign, by which stage the epidemic was well entrenched in the gay male population (Watney 1990, Weeks 2007). In the absence of an official response to the epidemic, gay liberation activists developed a range of strategies to promote safe sex within the gay community and to put homosexuality and safe sex on the mainstream political and public agenda (Weeks 2007, 2000).

Jeffrey Weeks (2007) argues that organisers working with gay communities were able to build on the political activism and identity work of the Gay Liberation Movements during the 1970s and respond to the epidemic with 'inventiveness, and creativity' (*ibid.:* 100), with survey evidence suggesting that by the late 1980s two-thirds of the gay male population were using safer-sex techniques (Watney 1990, Weeks 2007). Working within these community settings, activists and educators recognised that safer sex campaigns had to embrace eroticism and

positive, diverse models of sexuality in order to effect behaviour change (Watney 1990), for example in the promotion of 'Jack-Off' or 'J/O' parties that arose in San Francisco and New York in the early 1980s (Altman 1992, 2001). Denis Altman (1992, 2001) argued that these 'mass sexual encounters where only kissing, fondling and mutual masturbation is allowed' offered more realistic and ultimately safer alternatives to officially promoted safer sexual practice which focused almost entirely on condom use (Altman 1992). For Altman 'the eroticization of massage, masturbation, fantasy, and even sado-masochistic scripts can all be consistent with the promotion of 'safe sex' (1992: 41), potentially leading to 'redefining' of sexuality so that people are willing to see non-penetrative sexual practices as sexually fulfilling and pleasurable.

These community-based safer sex strategies drew on the significant body of research conducted during this time following a major funding boost in various Western countries (Altman 1992, Holland and Thomson 2010). Much of this work presented a direct critique of behaviourist approaches to sexuality, drawing on social constructivist approaches to highlight the significance of social, cultural and political context for understanding concepts of 'safety' and 'risk' (i.e. Holland et al 1998, Carballo et al 1989). The WRAP and MRAP studies discussed above are examples of this work, detailing how social constructionist and feminist theory can be used to show that 'safe sex' practices are not just questions of condom use, but of negotiating gender identities and asymmetrical power relations.

Feminist activists and writers during this period expressed optimism that the search for safer sexual practices might lead to a more 'feminist' approach to sex and sexuality within heterosexual communities, with less emphasis on male-centred approaches to sexuality that centre around vaginal penetration and male

orgasm (Willis 1989, ACT UP/NY 1990). Monica Pearl for example suggested that 'the introduction of safe sex techniques has the profound potential to eroticize sex. It can be an opportunity to experiment with non-penetrative ways of turning each other on' (Pearl 1990).

Although it seems unlikely that the promotion of 'J/O' parties could become part of sexual health initiatives to be used with young people, elements of this approach are advocated in the literature calling for the inclusion of pleasure in school based sex education programmes (Ingham 2005, Allen 2001, Hirst 2004) and in resources such as '*101 Ways to show someone you love them without having sex*' which explore how to have fun, intimacy and a range of sensual experiences without having penetrative sex (See Adams 2007 for an example of this approach and Ingham 2007 for critique).

Several advocates for the inclusion of pleasure in sex education argue that Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) programmes continue to focus on vaginal penetrative sex leading to a 'silencing of alternative ways of giving and receiving pleasure' (Ingham 2005: 382) and a failure to recognise the broad range of young people's sexual desires and experiences (Allen 2004, Ingham 2005, Hirst 2004). Julia Hirst's research with young people in Northern England found that her participants were engaging in a number of sexual practices that were omitted from sex education including having sex outdoors, having oral or anal sex, and engaging in mutual masturbation (Hirst 2004). Hirst argues that the focus in SRE on vaginal penetration reinforces heteronormative and reproductive discourses of sexuality and fails to provide young people with guidance on the 'continuum' of sexual experiences that they encounter (Hirst 2004, Ingham 2005, Allen 2004).

Roger Ingham suggests that one way of challenging this current approach is to focus on changing the outcomes frameworks used to evaluate SRE programmes (2005). Ingham's argument is based on his analysis of the outcomes frameworks for three major SRE programmes in the UK (SHARE, RIPPLE and APAUSE) which he suggests focus primarily on the reduction of negative sexual health outcomes, namely teenage pregnancy and STI transmission. Whilst Ingham argues that these are 'laudable and justifiable aims' (2005: 379), he suggests that the emphasis on reproduction and STI transmission leads to a narrow focus in SRE programmes that fails to recognise the range of sexual practices that young people engage in and the diverse motivations for doing so. Ingham argues that this could be addressed through giving greater priority to pleasure and sexual diversity in outcomes frameworks. He suggests for example that that one 'legitimate' way of measuring the 'effectiveness' of sex education could be to assess 'the extent to which young people feel confident to persuade partners that alternatives can be almost or equally (or more) pleasurable and, conversely, that partners accept that this the case?' (2005:328) Whilst I would argue the concept of 'persuasion' seems highly problematic given what we know about young people's gendered experiences of pressure and coercion in sexual relationships (Holland et al 1998), Ingham's focus on the need to tackle the intended outcomes of SRE programmes in order to ensure that its content and delivery shifts, provides an important contribution to these debates.

Commentating on responses to the 1980s HIV/AIDs crisis Simon Watney (1990) cautioned against directive approaches to safer sex promotion that encourage people to have non-penetrative sex as a 'safe' alternative to penetration. Watney suggests that such approaches are likely to reinforce perceptions of safer sex as an imposed system of constraints, provoking feelings of resistance, reluctance,

guilt and fear (Watney 1990. See Ingham 2007 for similar critique of 'delay' approaches to sex education for young people). Watney argued that any model of behaviour change must develop a 'theory of desire' that locates sexual behaviour within the domain of sexual fantasy and actual erotic practices. For Watney this includes considering the ways in which experiences of desire and pleasure can require the abandonment of the levels of consciousness that behaviour change necessitates (Watney 1990:20). In Watney's view, the most successful safer sex responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic were rooted in 'gay cultural practices' and community values, giving different communities the confidence and vital opportunity to talk openly about sex, fantasy and desire (Watney 1990, Eisenberg et al 2011). Watney's suggestion that this strategy for HIV/AIDS prevention could be usefully applied within heterosexual communities where open discussion about desire is less common, has in many ways been put to work by contemporary advocates of *The Pleasure Project* whose work is discussed above as an example of the ways in which discourses of sexual liberation and politicised pleasure continue to be taken up and applied within different sexual and practice communities.

Conclusion: a critical pause

In this chapter I have outlined the key arguments for the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health and education work with young people, drawing on debates within academic and practitioner communities. Within the two bodies of literature discussed, the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health domains is linked to a range of desired outcomes; more open communication about sexuality within sexual communities, increased awareness of diverse sexual practices and identities, the development of critical (feminist) awareness, increased use of condoms and more

effective use of family planning techniques, the development of increased

knowledge of sexual bodily response and logistics and increased sexual agency

and empowerment, particularly but not exclusively for young women. In this way

the 'pleasure project' is imagined (sometimes concurrently) as a feminist inflected

pedagogy (Kehily 2012) and as a public health tool that in its different forms is

informative, political, libratory, transgressive and regulatory.

Throughout this thesis I engage critically with the arguments set up in this chapter,

using the data generated during fieldwork to question some of these concepts of

'pleasure' 'desire' and 'erotics' and to explore how they play out in young people's

sexual lives and cultures. Central to my approach is the call to develop a 'theory of

desire' (Watney 1990) that is rooted in community values and cultural practices.

Although the diversity and fluidity of the group of young people I research

challenges any boundaried sense of a sexual or erotic 'community' (Back 1996,

see chapter three), the research is grounded in an approach to understanding

'pleasure' that starts with examining the experiences and values of a particular,

situated social group.

My discussion in this chapter has focused largely on young women, femininity and

heterosexuality, to the detriment of detailed discussion of masculinity, queer

identities, young men and LGBTQ young people. This asymmetry reflects the

focus in the body of feminist literature I draw on that has prioritised girls' voices

and desires as a way of countering their exclusion from public discourses and

debate around sexuality (See Tolman 2012, Tolman and Szalacha 1999). It also

reflects the current preoccupation in media, policy and academic work on

representations of girls' bodies in the media and the imagined impact of

sexualisation on girls' identities, well-being and sexual practices (See Gill 2009,

Attwood 2006, Kehily 2012). Further it reflects an emphasis in public health domains on the bodies and sexual practices of young women who are frequently the targets of programmes aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy or sexual violence through encouraging young women to delay or abstain from sexual intercourse or to take responsibility for using contraception (Hawkes 1995).

In the field of youth and gender studies there is now an increasing interest in researching the lives of young men, although surprisingly few studies have taken a holistic approach to the subject, integrating work on masculinities and femininities (Nayak and Kehily 2008:4). Nayak and Kehily argue for a focus on the 'practice of gender' as a lived process and a 'set of relations configured through technologies, bodies, spatial, discursive and material processes' (2008:5). This involves moving away from research practices that set out to compare and contrast the behaviour of young men and young women, thus preserving the sex/gender binary, towards an understanding of gender practices as produced, regulated, consumed and performed in the context of young people's lives and cultures. In adopting this approach, this thesis intends to build on studies that have examined the topic of sexual pleasure comparatively in relation to (heterosexual) young men and young women (Holland et al 1998, Allen 2003) and consider what can be learnt about young people's sexual experiences and understandings of pleasure through resisting a comparative, discursive approach. In doing so this study contributes to what Louisa Allen and Moira Carmody (2012) have termed a 'critical pause' in which feminist researchers are stopping to reflect on the feminist pleasure project and considering ways of developing its potential in theory and in practice.

Chapter 3: Methods – exploring possibilities

One of the aims of this study is to explore the methodological possibilities for researching sexual pleasure with young people and to use the insights gained from this process to develop a set of tools for researchers and practitioners to use in work with young people around 'good sex' and sexual pleasure. In order to address this aim I have employed a reflexive, multi-method design that has involved using different methods of data collection and analysis and reflection on the potential of each method for creating safe and engaging spaces for this work. As I set out below, this methodological line of enquiry is framed by debates within the methods literature that suggest that researching the topic of sexual pleasure with young people is a challenging and problematic endeavor.

This chapter provides a reflexive account of my methodological journey, detailing the tools of data collection and analysis used, the approaches to sampling and participant recruitment employed and how I have positioned myself within the research 'field'. In providing this reflexive account I hope to contribute to the debates that I outline below and to document some of the methodological *possibilities* for work in this area.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first provides an overview of key theoretical and methodological debates that have framed my research methodology and my decision to adopt a multi-method, reflexive, 'building-block' (Allen 2005a) research design. The second section introduces the London borough within which this research was located, while also considering the extent to which the research can be "located" in this geographic area considering the

mobility and fluidity of the participant sample(s). In reflecting on issues of access, sampling and my own location in the 'field', this section considers more broadly the implications of conducting research in a 'postmodern' city like London. The final section of this chapter is structured, like the thesis as a whole, around my temporal research journey through the three stages of fieldwork and the different methods of data collection used at each stage. In this section I provide detailed summaries of the methods of data collection and analysis and the sampling strategies employed at each stage of the research. In presenting this detailed account I hope to 'make explicit' the theoretical, ethical and practical considerations that have generated the analyses and conclusions presented in this thesis (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994) and in doing so, to provide an example of how I have employed the method of reflexivity that is central to my research and writing praxis.

Missing discourses, safe spaces and the reflexive feminist researcher

We now believe that the missing discourse of desire hasn't been missing at all. Perhaps, just perhaps, researchers (at minimum) haven't figured out how to mobilise cultural practices (including critical research methods) that would allow utterance of young women's desire to breathe (McClelland and Fine 2008: 96-97)

Researchers investigating young people's sexual cultures and practices have frequently noted that young people struggle to find an appropriate language for talking about sex in research contexts. Faced with a choice between the 'clinical/scientific' and the 'obscene/crude,' youth sexuality researchers have

frequently found that young people lack access to a language that they feel comfortable using in interview and focus group research contexts (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994: 138. Also see Frith 2000: 281, Holland et al 1998, Mitchell and Wellings 1998, Wight 1994, Robinson et al 2007).

In the previous chapter, I outlined a body of feminist research that has identified discourses of female desire, 'erotics' and pleasure, as 'missing' from 'official' education and health sexuality discourses. As the authors of these studies have noted, researchers may face particular difficulties interviewing young women about sexual desire and pleasure since young women have been found to lack access to 'a language to describe the ambiguities and uncertainties about sexuality and desire in positive terms' (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994: 138). Further it has been suggested that young women may feel unable to voice their sexual enjoyment in 'official' spaces as this may entail a major risk to their social reputations (Lees 1993, Holland and Ramazanoglou 1994, Hirst 2008). As one of Julia Hirst's teenage research participants, Maise, succinctly puts it in relation to voicing pleasure in educational spaces: 'How are you meant to admit ya like it? Teachers would think you're a slag' (Hirst 2004: 122). These reflections on conducting feminist youth sexuality research, as well as those offered in the literature on researching sensitive topics (Lee 1993, Lee and Renzetti 1990) and vulnerable populations (Liamputtong 2007, Heath et al 2009), highlight the challenges and potential ethical dilemmas of inviting young people to talk about sexual pleasure within research contexts constituted by regulatory peer norms and social norms and unequal power relations.

In the previous chapter I outlined the ways Michelle Fine uses the concept of the 'missing discourse of desire' to recognise the ways in which power relations

operate in institutional spaces to privilege certain discourses of sexual desire and exclude others, creating multiple silences around sexual desire that are shaped by gender, class, age, race and sexuality. Using the insights from her ethnographic work, Fine argues that young women need access to 'safe spaces' within which they can articulate the embodied sexual desires that are frequently silenced in official spaces and 'missing' from official discourses of sexuality. These concepts have framed my methodological line of enquiry as I have searched for ways in which I can create safe research spaces within which young people can talk with me, and with each other, about understandings and experiences that may be frequently marginalised, silenced or found to be 'missing' or 'unspoken in the larger culture' (Tolman and Szalacha 1999: 13).

The influence of structuralist, poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches within the social sciences however has unsettled any assumptions of a straightforward relationship between 'voice' and experience, knowledge and power (Flax 1992, Plummer 1995). Jane Flax argues that insights from postmodernist theory have helped to expose our 'enlightenment' desires as feminist researchers for a 'truth' or knowledge that will harbour greater social justice and equality (Flax 1992). Flax argues that we need to take responsibility for these desires and to situate ourselves 'within contingent and imperfect contexts, to acknowledge differential privileges of race, gender, geographic location, and sexual identities, and to resist the delusory and dangerous recurrent hope of redemption to a world not of our own making' (1992: 460).

McClelland and Fine (2008) argue that the 'methodological dilemma' for feminist youth sexuality researchers is no longer how to give voice to silenced or *missing* female voices and experiences, but how to develop the tools to listen to and

understand the *presence* of a multitude of voices, desires and experiences that can be captured through research with young people. They conceptualise this shift as the need for feminist researchers to unravel 'a kind of discursive cellophane' that makes it difficult for young women to speak 'as their tongues are weighed down with dominant assumptions and panics', and challenging for feminist researchers to hear, as 'our ears may be clogged with our dominant (feminist) discourses for *their* desires' (McClelland and Fine 2008: 233). The shift from documenting the presence or absence of sexual desire towards mapping how sexual desires and pleasures become spoken, embodied, performed and enacted is central to my research design and approach. It is also an approach that creates ethical dilemmas for the feminist researcher about how to both listen to and respect young women's accounts whilst also critically analysing the ideologies and discourses through which they speak (McClelland and Fine 2008, Gill 2007, Hammersely 2006).

In their research McClelland and Fine (2008) have developed a framework of 'thick desire' that locates sexual well-being and sexual desire within structural contexts, and encourages researchers to 'thread the sexual experiences and wants of young people to the ideologies, policies, power relations, institutions, families, and schools in which they live and develop' (McClelland and Fine 2008: 244). This process of 'threading' young people's narratives of sexual experience to what Ann Phoenix (2008) refers to as the 'local context' of the research encounter and the 'wider social context' within which this encounter takes place, is central to my analytic approach and my desire to explore the ways in which meanings about 'good sex' are performed, produced and marginalised in different affective and interactive contexts.

Reflexivity was central to both this analytic strategy and the implementation of a multi-method, 'building-block' (Allen 2005a) research design in which each stage of the research employs a different method and builds on the insights from the previous stage. In order to assess whether each method of data collection and analysis "worked" - both in terms of whether it has enabled me to address the research aims and objectives, and whether it has enabled me to create the ethically 'safe' spaces I desired - I have drawn on the major contributions made by feminist scholars on critical reflexivity (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994, Oakley 1992: 344, Mason 1996: 164-5, Maynard and Purvis 1994, Stanley and Wise 1993). Celia Brackenridge argues that reflexivity offers the researcher a method that helps her 'both to locate herself within the power dynamics of the research relationship [...] and to adopt a healthy scepticism toward the truth of her findings' (Brackenridge 1999: 339-400). For Janet Holland and Caroline Ramazanoglu (1994) this requires questioning the authority of our conclusions, trying to make the research process and the power relations within this explicit and opening up the possibly for multiple interpretations of research data.

This chapter provides detailed summaries of the methods of data collection and analysis that I used at each stage of the research. In presenting accounts of my data analysis in this way I aim to make explicit the subjective and technical decisions I have made in order to generate the insights and conclusions presented in this thesis (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994). As Janet Holland and Caroline Ramazanoglu argue 'coming to conclusions is not just a process of following rules or methods to the end point of a research project, but a very active and complex process of social construction' (1994:125).

In the following section of this chapter I consider my own role in creating and

constituting the "field" that I am researching, reflecting on the decisions that I have made and my location within the research as a white adult British woman, a middle class professional and a local resident. I offer this account as an example of how I have been 'doing' reflexivity (Mauthner and Doucett 2003) and 'working with' emotions (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2001) in my research and writing praxis, providing examples of how I have used my own emotional experiences in the "field" to further my understanding and analysis of the data and the people, places and institutions that I am researching.

Researching (sex) in the city: the sample and the 'field'

The city is many things: a spatial location, a political entity, an administrative unit, a place of work and play, a collection of dreams and nightmares, a mesh of social relations, an agglomeration of economic activity (Hubbard 2006:1).

Locating (and creating) the field

This study is located in the London Borough of Islington[4], a small local authority of six square miles in North London. I wanted to limit the research to one local authority area so that I could 'get to know' the local services and neighbourhoods within which I was conducting my research, an approach that was necessary given my theoretical interest in examining the ways in which young people's sexual learning and understandings of pleasure are shaped by socio-cultural, institutional and relational contexts. Although a comparison site could have offered additional

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[4] The research received approval from the Open University Human Participants and Material Research Ethics committee (HPMEC/2010/#698/1) who approved that the research location would not be anonymised. This was also negotiated with all research participants and gatekeepers, all of whom are anonymised in this thesis.

insight into the ways in which social locations shape sexual values and practices (see Thomson 2000b, Tolman 2002, Tolman and Szalacha 1999), my methodological line of enquiry and interest in using multiple research methods meant that including more than one research location was beyond the scale of this project.

The research site was selected in collaboration with Brook as I wanted the study to be located within one of the 16 regional areas in the UK where Brook had a contract to offer services. I hoped that working closely with a local Brook team would both facilitate my access to local services and groups of young people, and maximise the benefits and relevance of the research to the funding organisation. The ease with which I was able to gain access to a range of different institutions and outreach projects in the 'field' and integrate myself in professional interagency networks reflects the benefits of working on a co-funded research project.

The criteria for participating in the research were that the participant had to be aged 16-25 and live, work, study or access a service in Islington. At the first stage of the research the criteria were deliberately broad as I hoped to use the survey to recruit a diverse pool of volunteer participants from which I could identify particular groups and individual young people to take part in the focus groups and interviews (see below for details of the focus group and interview sampling criteria). During this initial stage of fieldwork I visited a range of youth, sexual health and educational services with the aim of recruiting young people to take part in all three stages of the research. In order to maximise the diversity of the participant sample, I visited multiple sites, rather than focusing on one institution or project. I was particularly interested in visiting projects that engaged with young people on issues related to sexuality, such as sexual health clinics, LGBT youth groups, a Brook peer education group and (unsuccessfully) groups for young people living

with HIV and AIDS. With a few exceptions[5], all of the participants in the study were recruited via the 16 different youth, sexual health and educational institutions and projects that I visited during the fieldwork period. Details of these services are provided in Appendix I along with the number of visits I made to each site and the number of participants recruited as a result of visiting each site.

At all three stages of fieldwork I struggled to recruit equal numbers of young men to participate in the research and I found that I needed to employ different strategies and approaches to engage young men in the research. I found that the male practitioners that I worked alongside were much more effective than I was at engaging young men in the research through either building on well established relationships of reciprocated respect or through the practitioner engaging in processes of cajoling, banter and persuasion that appeared to be a familiar and well rehearsed routine for both parties.

In gaining access to the 'field' and generating the participant sample I was able to draw on my relationships with staff at Brook to gain access to both large institutions such as the local Further Education (FE) college, as well as to a range of smaller targeted services for groups of young people who may have been invisible or 'hard to read' via large institutions. For example, during the second stage of fieldwork I conducted a focus group with a group of young men who been taking part in a series of sex and relationship education sessions with a Brook outreach worker and the lead youth worker at the local youth project. These young men were all part of a local gang who worked illegally from a nearby housing estate, were all involved in the criminal justice system and bar one, were not involved in education or training. Previous attempts to access similar vulnerable

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[5] The exceptions are the three participants who completed the questionnaire online (see Appendix I) and the focus group (Rochelle) and interview (Sheikh) participants who accompanied friends to the research encounters at their friend's request.

groups of young people via the youth offending service for example, had been unsuccessful. This group was only possible due to the relationship that the sexual health outreach worker had developed with the youth worker who had built up good relationships with the young men over a period of approximately 5 years.

The decision to access young people via institutional settings, rather than for example via online networks or residential settings meant that I could visit and observe a range of institutional settings and practices, generating useful insights for considering the implications of the research for practice. Adopting this sampling approach also meant that the sample shaped to some extent according to the criteria of the institutions that I was able to visit. For example, although Brook work with young people up to the age of 25, many of the services and institutions that they work with in Islington only cater for young people under 22, or in some cases under 20. As a result of accessing participants via services that categorise 'youth' in these ways, 93% of survey participants and all of the interview and focus group participants are aged 16-22. The difficulty I experienced in accessing young people in their twenties via youth institutions and services reflects the ambiguous 'adult' status of this group of the population. Whilst researchers claim that many young people in this age group are experiencing 'delayed' transitions to adulthood (See Jones 2002, 2009, Henderson et al 2007), the expansion of youth policy and state support under the New Labour government largely targeted teenage young people (i.e. Connexions, Teenage Pregnancy Unit) meaning that there were limited state sponsored spaces for this older age group.

Locating the sample: researching difference

My decision to sample young people as Islington *service users*, rather than Islington *residents* meant that a large proportion of young people in the sample were not living in the fieldwork area. As detailed above I decided to limit the research to the London Borough of Islington and as a result only visited sites within these local authority boundaries. Although some services that I visited only provided a service to young people living in Islington (i.e. Connexions), the majority offered support to young people regardless of where they were living.

As a result, young people who took part in the study lived all over London and beyond, often travelling long distances to access the youth or sexual health service, college or university that I met them at. The map below marks the location of each postcode area where survey participants were residing[6]. This spatial representation of the data shows how the survey sample of young people spills beyond the administrative boundaries of the London borough and the research boundaries of the identified fieldwork site. .

The research sample is diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion and place of birth (as well as place of residence), seeming to confirm what is known about the high volumes of migration in and out of London (ONS 2011) and the fluidity of urban youth and student populations in an increasingly 'super diverse' Britain (Vertovec 2006, Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah 2010. See Appendix J, K and L for further details of partcipant samples). Data relating to survey participants' place of birth

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[6] This map is generated using data from survey question 8 (see Appendix E), which asked respondents to provide the first half of their current postcode. One marker is provided per postcode, not per participant. Three participants lived outside of the Greater London area and are not shown on this map.

for example indicates that half (51%) the survey participants were born outside of London and a third (33%) were born outside of the UK (See Appendix I for further details). At one of the universities I visited, only five of the twenty young people surveyed were born in the UK, and only three of these in London. The rest of this small sample of fifteen young people were born in twelve different countries: Sri Lanka, Italy, Hong Kong, Germany, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Portugal, Eritrea, Estonia, Djibouti and Ethiopia.

Figure 1: Map detailing the location of each residential postcode provided by survey participants
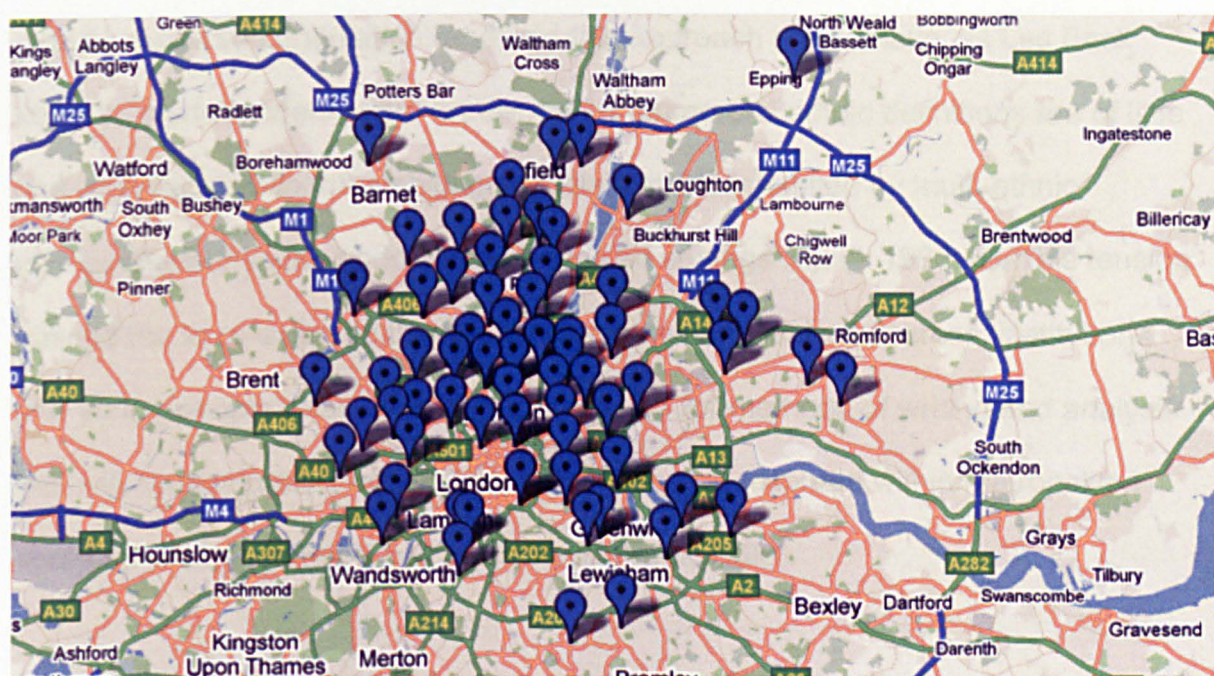
Whilst not representative of the wider 'youth' or London population, the sample is suggestive of a mobile, disparate population of young people, whose lives and cultures cannot be understood in terms of 'territory', geography or shared relationship with place (Dolby 2003). This has implications for how I have been able to conceptualise and represent the research 'field' and participant 'sample' in

my writing and analysis, as well as for what kinds of encounters were possible during fieldwork. Assembling groups of young people from the original sample to conduct focus groups was challenging. The young people were not 'from' the same location (both in terms of current residence and place of birth) and whilst some young people were happy to travel across London to meet with me in unfamiliar buildings and locations, others were reluctant or unable to travel into certain neighbourhoods or visit unfamiliar locations.

I had originally wanted to focus the research on one geographic area in London in order to map the locally available social, economic, cultural and institutional resources available to young people in relation to sex and pleasure. Evidence of a mobile, dispersed population rendered this approach problematic; as Les Back argues, 'crude models of the "traditional" or primordial ethnic definitions are of little use when applied to the ambiguous social ground inhabited by multi-ethnic communities of young people in metropolitan settings' (Back 1996: 8). This tension has led me to re-examine the relationship between place, resources, institutions and young people's sexual lives and to search for methods of writing and analysis that will 'render explicit the multiple influences that resonate within metropolitan contexts such as London and other cities' (Back 1996).

Doreen Massey argues that theorising contemporary youth cultures requires a re-examination of the relationship between 'culture' and place in order to account for the complex interaction between local and global cultures. For Massey it is important to conceptualise space in terms of complex interacting social relations, within which 'both individuals and social groups are constantly engaged in efforts to territorialise, to claim space, to include some and exclude others from particular areas' (Massey 1998: 126). In order to examine this empirically, Massey suggests

trying to map the complex 'geography of influences' in any particular youth culture, and the different kinds of power relations that they embody.

> Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings and this in turn allows a sense of place which is extraverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local (Massey 1993: 66).

In his account of the 'postmodern city' Kevin Robbins (1993) writes of the ways in which evidence of urban movement and flow can appear to disarticulate social meaning and identity from place. We know from empirical studies however that young people continue to identify with local places (Watt and Stenson 1998: 252, Hendry et al 1993) and that forms of social exclusion and inclusion can work through notions of belonging and entitlement in particular times and places (Henderson et al 2007, Back 1996). In the analysis presented in this thesis I explore participants' experiences of living in a 'postmodern city' that I suggest is characterised by the diversity, movement and flow captured by accounts of urban postmodernity (Robbins 1993) but also by inequality and social exclusion. The data presented in the following three chapters draws on the experiences of the young international students mentioned above who have travelled thousands of miles (and presumably spent thousands of pounds) to study in the fieldwork area, as well as young people such as 17 year old Oscar[7], *'I don't want to move out of my area. I want the biggest house in my area. That's it. It's where I live, innit? It's my manor!'*

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[7] All names are pseudonyms mostly chosen by participants. See Appendix L for details of all interview participants.

My interest in this thesis is in examining the ways in which these movements, locations and exclusions shape young people's understandings about sexual relationships and the kinds of resources that they are able to access to make sense of these sexual meanings and values. In my analysis of the data I examine the ways in which participants' cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as their experiences of migration and exclusion have enabled particular understandings and experiences of 'good sex'. With the survey data this is established through looking for patterns in young people's definitions of 'good' and 'bad' sex across a range of demographic variables, in the interview data through conducting a biographical narrative analysis of young people's evolving life stories and in the focus group data through looking at the cultural resources and languages that participants draw on and debate within the different peer group contexts.

Locating the researcher: living and working in the "field"

The research location selected in collaboration with Brook was coincidently the area of London that I had recently moved to one year prior to starting fieldwork. Living in the borough where I was conducting the fieldwork enabled me to adopt a flexible and opportunistic approach to the research. This was particularly valuable during the first stage of fieldwork when I was distributing the questionnaire and meeting new potential participants. As the borough covers only 6 square miles I was never more than a short cycle ride from any of the services or events that I attended, enabling me to move easily between different sites in one day and attend evening youth work and football training sessions, sometimes with only half an hour advance notice.

My physical proximity to participants' social, residential and institutional spaces

was convenient but could not dissolve the multiple forms of difference that played

out in different ways in each research encounter. As one interview participant

reminded me, somewhat awkwardly in the midst of describing what it is like to be a

young man growing up in his local area - *'You've been young before and that but*

where... where... I know it sounds silly but whereabouts like are you from?'.

Oscar's question recognises that we have a shared experience of having been

'young' but it also acknowledges that we are not 'from' the same geographic or

socio-economic location. In my field notes I reflect that I felt nostalgic when I was

interviewing Oscar'; his white British working class accent and identity as a

labouring, caring 'breadwinner' evoked strong memories of the boys I had grown

up with 15 miles away and 20 years previously. Whatever emotional connection I

was experiencing with Oscar's gender identity performance and his ethnic and

class background, he was right to implicitly acknowledge that I had no idea what it

was like to be a young male *'little fucker'* growing up watching the *'bigger ones*

doing it on the block' and facing have my life *'ruined'* through involvement in gangs

and criminality (See chapter six).

Anne Marie Fortier writes of the 'illusion of multicultural intimacy' that suggests that

power relations and conflict can be suspended through dialogue and proximity

(Fortier 2007: 11). Her analysis of contemporary cultural texts and policy

documents suggests that living with difference is a multifaceted and emotional

experience in which desire, tolerance, discomfort and violence intermingle (Fortier

2007: 110). For Fortier, 'living with difference' involves the simultaneous existence

of proximity and difference, an experience which she suggests is an inherent

feature of urban living in many cities in the UK. Although Fortier's work focuses on

racial and ethnic difference, mixing and inequality, I have found her work useful for

theorising the emotional syncretism involved in living, working and researching with difference and for looking for ways to explore this existence in my analysis of the data.

When a focus group participant told me a story about having sex in the lift at a local estate a few months previously (see chapter five), I realised that I was living on that estate at the time, having subsequently moved out a few months later. As I became aware of our former residential proximity and shared use of space, I was reminded of the distance between our social and economic locations and the disparity between our life trajectories and use of social space. As Fortier writes (2007), 'living with difference' is embedded in relations of distance, power and conflict so that who gets close to whom and under what circumstances is not left to chance. Unlike my participants, my income, social networks, employment and PhD studies meant that I rarely spent time on the estate and never socialised there. Further I had access to my own private space and did not need to use the local lifts, parks and buses visited by young people lacking access to beds and private spaces to have sex in (Hirst 2004). These were my former neighbours, yet it was a constructed research encounter about "good sex" that brought us into dialogue, not our former residential proximity or shared use of public space.

My professional identity was an important resource during the first stage of fieldwork and one that I at times struggled to balance with my new, less confident researcher identity. My experience and identity as a youth practitioner meant that I could identify and empathise with many of the practitioners that I met and spent time with during the first stage of research. I was familiar with the jargon of NEETs (Not in Education Employment or Training), LACs (Looked After Children) and ECM (Every Child Matters), the culture of targets, stretched resources and time

constraints, as well as a passion I shared with the majority of practitioners I met for supporting and empowering young people. Building relationships with practitioners and working alongside them facilitated easy access to various groups of young people, but at times it also aligned me with a range of establishments, protocols and forms of communication that I was not always comfortable with. When I was distributing the questionnaire at sites such as the training centre and the detached youth work sessions, the practitioners that I was with attempted to convince and cajole young people to take part in the research. This was a practice that contradicted my research ethics and my assurance to potential participants that they should only participate if they wanted to. I noted however that in these sessions practitioners were continually engaged in motivating, persuading and convincing reluctant young people to take part in various different activities, of which completing my questionnaire was just one. The young people in these sessions, primarily young men, seemed to respond to this practice with a routine performance of refusal, reluctance, grudging acceptance and then interest in the activity. As I reflect in my discussion of my focus group sampling strategy, this approach may have offended my research ethics and ideal understanding of consent, but it also enabled a group of young men who may have been uncomfortable with unfamiliar situations, experiences and people, to participate in the research. This disparity between practitioner and research cultures is something I return to in the final chapter of this thesis to consider the implications of the study's methodological findings for practitioners working in varying institutional and policy contexts.

The methodological journey: stages 1-3

The fieldwork on which this thesis is based consisted of an initial stage of

exploratory and pilot work followed by three stages of data collection. In this section I provide detailed summaries of the methods of data collection and analysis and the sampling strategies that I used at each of the three stages of research. In my account I reflect on the ways in which these decisions and practices have generated the analyses presented in the following data chapters, providing an example of the reflexive practice that I advocate above.

This study forms part of a tradition of 'qualitatively driven' (Mason 2006b) feminist mixed methods research that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore young people's views, experiences and values relating to sexuality (see Tolman and Szalacha 1999, Allen 2005a, Thomson 2000b). In my discussion below I provide examples of how I have employed a 'practically-orientated' approach to 'mixing' different methods (Heath et al 2009: 17, Brannen 2008, Bryman 2006) that are often subject to disputed claims regarding their underpinning epistemologies (see Guba and Lincoln 1989).

Stage one: Survey and observation

The aim of the first stage of fieldwork was to become familiar with the local area, to map the provision of local youth and sexual health services and to recruit participants for the qualitative stages of the research. I also wanted to gain a broad overview of young people's views on 'good sex' and sexual relationships more broadly and to map the resources that they were using to develop these understandings. To achieve this I visited fifteen different youth, education and sexual health services and projects in the local borough where I conducted two surveys and undertook a series of observations of the young people and practitioners at these sites.

The two surveys were of young people aged 16-25 who were living, working, studying or accessing a service in Islington and of practitioners who were working for a youth or sexual health service in the borough. The primary aim of the surveys was to recruit participants for the qualitative stages of the research and to generate data on the two populations I was surveying to identify key groups and individuals to sample at subsequent stages of the research. Further, I wanted to use the young people's survey to gain a broad overview of young people's understandings of sex and relationships and the resources they were using in developing these understandings. The design of the young people's questionnaire reflects these different aims: part one uses closed questions to generate data relating to a range of demographic variables (age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, place of residence, place of birth, occupation, relationship status and parental status) as well as to participants' use of sexual health services and their perceived level of sexual experience. These were all variables against which I imagined I might want to sample groups of young people at subsequent research stages (i.e. a focus group of sexual health service users, LGBT young people, sexually experienced / inexperienced young people). The second half of the questionnaire uses open questions to identify resources participants were using to learn about sex and relationships and to generate data on participants' views on 'good' and 'bad' sex and sex and relationships more broadly[8] (See Appendix E for a copy of the questionnaire).

I also designed a questionnaire for practitioners (see Appendix F) and originally intended to use the data from this survey to inform a fourth stage of research

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[8] There is also a question relating to participants' media use which was intended to generate a list of popular media resources that could be used as the basis for focus group discussion at stage two, although this method was not eventually employed.

during which I would interview practitioners selected from the survey sample. Although 23 of the 39 practitioners who participated in the survey agreed to be interviewed I decided to focus the research on the views of young people and did not therefore pursue this final stage or include the data from the practitioners' survey in the thesis. My discussion of the survey design, administration and analysis in this chapter focuses therefore on the survey of young people. In the final chapter of this thesis I reflect on the enthusiasm of the practitioners that I met for participating in my research to make suggestions for further research in this area and to consider the potential inclusion of pleasure in sexual health work with young people.

The original aim for visiting local services was to distribute questionnaires and to recruit young people to take part in the qualitative stages of the research. Once I had started my fieldwork, I realised that the survey was an unexpectedly useful tool for enabling me to observe practitioners and young people in a range of institutional settings. Conducting the survey gave me purpose, confidence and a justification for spending hours 'hanging out' in sexual health clinic waiting rooms, college and university canteens, football pitches and youth clubs, for trailing the streets with outreach workers and for lounging on play mats with young mothers and their babies. Once I had explained who I was and that I was looking for research participants to complete a questionnaire, nobody seemed to question or mind my often extended presence in these spaces, sometimes in the case of the sexual health clinic for entire days.

During this stage of fieldwork I drew on ethnographic techniques, immersing myself in the field, observing young people and practitioners in their own settings, interacting with each other and with their children, friends and partners (Kehily

2002, Mac an Ghail 1994). Asking to shadow and accompany practitioners also meant that as we hung around waiting for young people or walking between sites I could spend time talking to practitioners about their work and their views on young people, sex and pleasure, often sparking rich conversations and debates that were relevant and interesting to my research – such as, what's the view of anal sex in the 'black' community? What does the new coalition government mean for sexual health services in Islington? After each visit I recorded these conversations in field notes, where I also described the physical surroundings and reflected on the emotional relationships that I observed between young people and different welfare institutions (Froggett 2002).

Previously, in much of the 'mixed methods' literature, qualitative and quantitative approaches have been understood as separate paradigms of research rooted in different epistemologies, requirements and procedures that cannot be integrated (Guba and Lincoln 1989, Mishler 1986). Although debates about the dilemmas of mixing quantitative and qualitative methods continue, most scholars now agree that in practice the methods can be productively, although not un-problematically, integrated (Brannen 2008, Bergman 2008, Bryman 2006, Tolman and Szalacha 1999, Mason 1996). Julia Brannen (2008) for example notes that the divide between quantitative and qualitative methods is often much more pronounced in theory than it is in practice.

This observation reflects my experience at this stage of fieldwork where I found that combining survey administration with inductive ethnographic techniques complemented and facilitated each method. Considering the sensitive nature of some of the questions posed on the questionnaire (What concerns do you have about your future sex and relationship experiences?) and the vulnerability of some

of the groups I was surveying, spending time with potential participants and gatekeepers with whom they had developed trusting relationships formed a necessary part of an ethical and sensitive approach to data collection.

As the structure of this thesis suggests, the data generated from these ethnographic techniques is not afforded the same status as the data from the survey, focus group and interview methods. There is no 'data' chapter dedicated to this method, rather I have used these data and the field notes recorded at this stage to inform my account of the research sites given in this chapter and to enrich my understanding of the institutional and material contexts within the data were generated (Thomson et al 2011). Below I offer two descriptive accounts of my visits to two research sites where I administered the questionnaire to young people. I use these accounts as examples of the embodied research practices involved in survey administration and how I have used my observations and experiences of engaging in these practices to gain insight into the institutional contexts and youth cultures that I am researching.

Example 1: The Young mothers' group

When I visited the Children's Centre it was a boiling hot day and very few of the young mums attended the session. Those that did completed the questionnaire slowly, one whilst her new born baby slept on her chest, stopping half way through to feed him and then returning to the questionnaire, interjected with discussion with the family support worker about complications with the father of her baby. Another mum filled in the questionnaire with one hand whilst sitting on the floor in the play area with her youngest child propped up between her legs as she fed her with her other hand, simultaneously keeping an eye on her toddler who played quietly at the other end of the room. In the cool calm of the play room she discussed with her unhappily pregnant-again friend beside her how little they were enjoying sex

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since having children. The skilful way in which the young women at the Children's Centre simultaneously chatted, completed questionnaires, looked after and supervised their children seemed indicative of both their daily multi-tasking practices and the necessity of balancing their own sexual and social needs with the needs of their children and partners.

Example two: Outreach youth work

When administering the questionnaire with the detached youth work service I walked around housing estates and streets with the youth workers and questionnaires were completed standing in the cold, usually on a busy road or by the side of a mini football pitch in a housing estate. On the three occasions we went out we didn't meet many young people. The youth workers were specifically looking, and struggling to find, NEET young people to participate in a new project they wanted to run. Their challenges in finding NEET young people and 'selling' the activities that local services could offer, mirrored the challenges I faced in involving this group of young people in the research. The relaxed ease with which the young people we did meet participated in the research, gave me their personal information and views on a sensitive research topic surprised, pleased and at times unsettled me.

On one occasion, the trainee detached youth worker I was with stopped a group of young men who had been participating in an outreach football coaching programme in the midst of playing a football game on their local estate. The football game paused as the young people I was introduced to each completed a questionnaire, leaning on the tarmac, or against the wired walls around the pitch, as did some of their friends and team mates and some other young people who were sitting nearby. Later that evening I wrote in my field notes – *'Why are they so obliging / helpful? Why don't they find me / what I am doing intrusive? Why is it ok for me to walk on to their estate and ask questions about sex?'*

Survey data analysis: descriptive analysis and tag clouds

In chapter four I present an analysis of the data generated from the survey of young people with a focus on the data relating to young people's views on 'good' and 'bad' sex and sex and relationships more broadly. To generate these analyses I entered all of the data from each questionnaire into SPSS, initially creating one variable for each survey question and then creating additional variables as I analysed the data and discovered new patterns and questions that I wanted to explore. Using SPSS I was able to conduct descriptive analysis of the data to gain an overview of the participant sample and to look for relationships for example between participants' gender and perception of their level of sexual experience. Once I had analysed the open-ended survey responses (see below) I was also able to explore whether there were any patterns or correlations between participants' views about sex and relationships and other variables such as gender, age or relationship status. As I do not have a representative sample my aim was to describe patterns in the data using cross-tabulation analyses rather than generalising about the views of a wider population of young people and seeking to establish statistical significance. As a result no tests of significance were conducted.

In my analysis of the open-ended survey responses I have combined inductive, qualitative approaches to data analysis concerned with identifying the ideas and meanings, with quantitative methods of 'counting' the numerical frequency with which particular words, ideas or themes occur within the data. The table provided in Appendix M details the process that I used to analyse this data and generate the insights that are presented and discussed in chapter four. Using a combination

of open manual coding, word frequency searches and content analysis methods to 'count' the frequency of identified codes meant that I could both identify and quantity broad patterns of meaning within the responses, playing to the strength of the survey method. This approach also meant that I could look for unusual or exceptional responses containing ideas that lack numerical significance within the data but that may be able to offer challenging or unexpected insights into the phenomena described (Hughes, Lewins, and Silver 2010). I used Nvivo software to conduct word frequency searches of the open ended data responses, initially to see if there were any frequently occurring words that could indicate ideas or themes that I had missed in my open coding of the data. I subsequently realised that the software created 'tag clouds' from each word frequency search, generating visual representations of the analysis through emphasising the most frequently occurring words using large and bold fonts (See chapter four for examples). In analysing the data and presenting the research findings I have found these visually arresting images to be a useful method for both 'visual thinking' and for 'visual communication' (Orford, Dorling and Harris 2003); a method for interrogating the survey data and exploring patterns of meaning, as well as a powerful way of presenting quantitative data to practitioner and academic audiences. In chapter four I use these images to *illustrate* patterns in the survey data but also as examples of how I have used these images to *generate* insights that did not emerge from using other methods of analysis. For example, in the tag clouds produced from responses to questions about participants' future expectations for their sex and relationship experiences it is the verbs, *having* and *getting,* that stand out in the images, rather than the nouns and themes that emerged from my thematic coding of the data (see chapter four). Evidence of this pattern caused me to reflect on the significance of the future orientated verbs

'having' and 'getting' and consider what insight they offer into participants' future hopes and fears about their future sexual relationships.

Stage two: Focus groups

In the second stage of fieldwork I conducted four focus groups with young people, using this method to explore how young people talk about 'good sex' and sexual pleasure in group settings and spaces. As Jenny Kitzinger and other researchers employing this method have noted, focus groups offer the researcher the opportunity to both generate spoken data on a given topic and to observe participants interacting within a group or peer context thus generating data on active social processes (Kitzinger 1995, Barbour 2009). Given that research with young people repeatedly identifies the peer group as an important site for sexual learning (Kehily 2001, Holland et al 1998 – see discussion in chapter one) and that the majority of formal sex education occurs in group contexts I felt that this was a particularly important context for me to observe and investigate.

In each focus group I led an activity called 'What is good sex?' in which I gave the group a set of cards each of which contained a quote about good sex or sexual pleasure. I had piloted this activity with three groups during the exploratory stage of research using quotes taken from a small, unpublished research project conducted for Brook in 2008 with young people in South London (Brook 2008. See Appendix G). At stage two of fieldwork I included additional quotes from the survey and pilot focus group discussions that related to key themes emerging from these early stages that I was interested in exploring further (i.e. good sex and religion, embodiment, disgust and pleasure). In each group I spread the cards out on the

table and asked the groups to pick cards that they agreed or disagreed with and discuss them with the group.

The 'What is Good sex?' activity lasted approximately 45 minutes and in three of the sessions was followed by a short break and a second discussion activity that lasted approximately 30 minutes. In the third focus group I only ran the first activity as the youth worker, sexual health worker and young men participating in this group only wanted to meet for 45 minutes which was not enough time to run both activities. The second activity focused on how young people learn about 'good sex', using a second set of discussion cards containing 'questions' provided by survey respondents (See Appendix G for example statements). Whereas the first discussion activity relates to my interest in exploring how young people understand good sex, the second activity aimed to explore how young people learn about good sex and what resources and support they see as being available, useful or necessary in order to support this process. As outlined in chapter one, I was originally interested in pursuing these two lines of enquiry but have subsequently moved away from looking at how young people *learn* about 'good sex' to considering what *counts* as 'good sex' within particular contexts. For this reason the data from the second activity are not included in chapter five, which focuses on how different accounts of 'good sex' gain currency and value in each situated group encounter. In the final chapter of the thesis I draw on some of the data from the second activity to consider the implications of the research for debates about the potential inclusion of pleasure in sexual health service delivery.

Rose Barbour (2009) notes that all comments made during focus groups are highly dependent upon context and are contingent upon group members' responses to others' contributions and the dynamics of that particular group (see

also Phoenix 2008). In my analysis of the focus group data I aim to capture this contingency and the importance of group dynamics and interaction, in part through considering the ways in which all those present in the room (including the assistant facilitator / practitioners and I) contribute towards constructing the group account of 'good sex', even if it is through our silence, disapproval or disagreement. For example, in the third focus group that I conducted a young man arrived half way through the session and after the youth worker reluctantly let him join the session he sat in the room, just outside the group circle. The young man was silent throughout the group, but was referred to and jokingly discussed by the other group members as *'virgin-man'* and as the favoured subject of the youth workers' racist preferences – *'so what you let him sit there and not me, what is this some sort of racism cuz?'*. This young man's silence meant that I have no idea if this young man agreed with any of the views put forward by his peers in this focus group, or how he understands sex or pleasure, but his presence in the group contributed to a group narrative of masculine performance that valorises male sexual experience and involves constant jostling for positions of power within the group. Furthermore, the mocking reference to virginity and racism hinted at topics that were not discussed in the group but that may have been key contested areas that the young men have had to negotiate in their lives.

Julia Brannen and Rob Pattman (2005) suggest treating the focus group as 'a site of performance' which involves not only analysing the data in terms of the content of what was said, but as a performance in which different identities and accounts are given validation and authenticity through coproduction (2005: 539).

Following Lorde (1984) and Butler (1990) identities are not fixed essences which people carry around with them from one context to another but are

always negotiated and performed in particular contexts. We have therefore been interested in how participants 'performed' in relation to one another: what they said, to whom they addressed themselves, their emotional engagement, the ways they presented themselves, and the punctuation of speech by laughter (Brannen and Pattman 2005:540).

In chapter five I draw on the metaphor of performance to provide a reflective account of each focus group as a kind of dramaturgical staging of persistent themes in the data to consider what we can learn about young people's sexual values, cultures and relationships from these group interactions and what significance this may have for practitioners wanting to work with young people in groups around the topic of sexual pleasure. In doing so my analysis draws on three broad overlapping approaches to data analysis: *thematic* analysis – identifying emerging themes in the data and coding transcripts iteratively, *narrative and discursive* analytic approaches (Phoenix 2008) that pay attention to participants' strategies for communicating and interacting with each other and approaches that seek to capture *emotion and affect* within the data, drawing particularly on Margaret Wetherell's work (2012) on discursive-affective practice.

Focus group sample: theory and practice

There is debate in the focus group methods literature as to whether researchers should conduct focus groups with 'pre-existing' groups of people who already know each other or with 'researcher-convened' or 'nominal' groups of people who may not know each other and have no group identity or purpose beyond the research encounter (See Barbour 2009:66-7 for discussion or Heath et al 2009 89-91 for overview of debates in relation to youth research. See also Silverman 1993,

Kitzinger 1995, Barbour and Kitzinger 1998). During the exploratory stage of the research I found that working with 'pre-existing' groups at an FE college in outer London enabled me to swiftly and easily access large numbers of young people. I found it challenging however to ensure that young people in these groups felt genuinely able to opt out of the group activities and discussion, particularly when peers and dominant group members displayed enthusiasm for the activity or when the gatekeepers instructed or urged the group members to participate. For this reason I decided that during fieldwork I would convene groups of young people who had all individually volunteered to participate in the research and used the survey as a way of enabling young people to opt in or out of the qualitative research stages of the research.

All survey participants had the option of volunteering to participate in the qualitative stages of the research through providing their contact details on a detachable sheet at the back of the questionnaire (See Appendix E). This generated a list of 82 volunteers from which I decided to create three groups of young people; a group of LGBQ young people and two groups of heterosexual young people – one group of sexually *in*experienced participants and another of sexually *experienced* participants. This approach was informed by the exploratory and pilot stage of the research when to my surprise the college tutor arranging the sessions defined her two tutor groups as the 'virgins' and the 'young parents'. When I met and spoke with these and other groups at the college, I became increasingly interested in the ways in which these categories of sexual experience seemed to enable and restrict young people's understandings and talk about sexual pleasure in the group context, as outlined in chapter one. My decision to create a separate focus group for LGBQ young people was informed by my desire to create a safe space for young people to discuss the queer desires, identities

and practices that are frequently silenced in youth peer group and institutional settings (Britzman 2010 [1995], Epstein and Johnson 1998, Epstein et al 2003). My decision was also theoretically informed by an interest in exploring whether this 'queer' space would enable young people to imagine and talk about pleasure with the kind of creativity and diversity often evoked in theoretical work in this area (Allen and Carmody 2012 - see chapter two).

To put this theoretically informed sampling approach into practice I used data from participants' survey responses to question 3, which asks respondents to indicate their sexual identity and question 13 which asks respondents to rate on a scale of 1 – 10, how 'sexually experienced' they considered themselves to be (See Appendix E)[9]. Using these data I divided the volunteer sample into the three categories outlined above and invited young people from each category to attend a focus group at The Open University North London campus which is located in an area close to the fieldwork site. This approach was however difficult to put into practice and the groups that emerged from hours of careful theoretical and ethical planning, texting, calling and emailing were not the theoretically informed samples that I had imagined.

For example, twenty three young people were invited to the first group all of whom had indicated on the questionnaire that they were heterosexual and had a sexual experience rating of 8-10. The day before the 'experienced' focus group took place 13 young people confirmed that they would attend, having all received directions and maps by email or post and a reminder text message about the group. The

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[9] Question 13 states 'How sexually experienced do you consider yourself to be? Put a cross on the line from 1-10. 1 means that you think that you have very little sexual experience. 10 means that in your opinion you have a lot of sexual experience' Responses were then grouped together into three categories; low (1-3), medium (4-7) and high (8-10), The survey did not define 'sexual experience' or state whether this included sex with another person or not.

following day only 2 people attended: an 18 year old young man I had met at the peer educators group who had rated his level of sexual experience as 8/10, and a 19 year old woman I met at a young mother's group who had indicated that she had a 'medium' level of sexual experience (5) but who had wanted to come along with a friend from the mothers' group (the friend did not turn up!). The 'sexually experienced focus group', resulted in a conversation between two young people with very different sexual biographies and investments in the value of having and talking about personal sexual experience.

Although the size of focus group one was below any recommended minimum number (Ritchie and Lewis 2003, Bloor et al 2001, Kitzinger and Barbour 1999, Bloor et al 2001) I have still considered this interaction as a 'group' encounter and as distinct from an in-depth interview. During the final stage of fieldwork I conducted an 'interview' with two young people who were close friends (Sarah and Sheikh – see Appendix L) and although the number of participants was the same as in focus group one, the mood, emotional tone and conversational mode were distinct. Sitting in the spacious room in which the 'focus group' was held with the co-facilitator and two young people that had never met before gave the encounter a public, performative dimension that was more muted in the interview that I later conducted, held in a small room next door, with two young people who already knew each other's sexual histories and preferences and who had shared difficult emotional experiences together. In the interview with Sarah and Sheikh we worked our way through each of the interview sections as they each told their personal 'stories' to me, with occasional interjections, laughter or comments from the other. In focus group one however focus group participants Vinnie and Wallay asked each other questions, contradicted and teased each other and argued amiably about particular topics. Whilst Wallay told us several stories about personal sexual

experiences, Vinnie talked in very general terms, only once referring to her own sexual experience with reference to the regret she feels about the first time she had sex.

Although this first 'group' generated rich discussion (see chapter five) the low turn out rate meant that I was unable to explore what kinds of group narratives and performances are made possible within a space where all group members consider themselves to be sexually experienced and are asked to talk about sexual pleasure. This opportunity emerged however in the impromptu focus group that I conducted when my request to observe an outreach sexual health session with a group of young men at a local youth centre, resulted in me being able to run a focus group (focus group three). Although I have no survey data on these young men and do not therefore know how they would rate their level of experience on a questionnaire scale, they all presented themselves as sexually experienced as part of a powerful group performance of 'hyper-masculine sexuality' within which male virginity was silenced and ridiculed (Nayak and Kehily 1997 – see chapter five). Ironically, this 'sexually experienced group' was the group where I had no access to information about the participants' level of sexual experience prior to conducting the group, or any control over who was included and excluded from the group. Unlike the other three groups, in this group (focus group three) the young people were all part of a peer group and a local gang that had an identity and set of meanings and practices that existed outside of the research encounter and that were rooted in the local area. This is reflected in the way in which the young men's accounts of their sexual experiences were framed by reference to local estates, parks, tube stations, markets and bus routes in a way that was absent from the other groups where the participants lacked a shared sense of space and locality (See chapter five).

Overall 16 young people participated in the four focus groups I conducted (see Appendix K) a much lower number than I had anticipated and considerably less than the 36 who participated in the four groups I held at the local FE College where I conducted my exploratory and pilot work. Although the groups all generated rich discussion, I was unable to put into practice the theoretically and ethically informed sampling approach that I had carefully designed; the 'queer' group largely involved discussion of heterosexual relationships and pleasures, the 'sexually experienced' group revolved around the discussion of one young man's sexual experiences and the 'sexually inexperienced group' consisted of three young people who had never had sex and the often isolated voice of one sexually experienced woman who attempted to complicate and question some of her co-participants' claims. I have found however that reflecting on these challenges and frustrations offers insight into the instability and fluidity of the sexual categories that I wanted to interrogate. In chapter five I show how these insights have come to form part of my analysis of the group narratives and performances that these strange encounters produced and consider, for example the tensions between the voices of experience and idealism in focus group two and how and why the 'queer' group discussion came to focus largely on heterosexual pleasures and experiences.

Recording, transcribing and negotiating consent

All focus group and interview participants were given an information sheet about the research (see Appendix B) in advance and at the time of the interview / focus group. I asked each participant to choose a 'fake name' (pseudonym) and to complete a 'deciding if you want to take part' form (Appendix A) that I used to

negotiate and (not always) gain consent to conduct and audio record the interview or focus group. When interviewing Tania for example she indicated on the form that it was 'Not ok' for me to ask her about her views about sex and relationships, leading to an awkward, but productive conversation in which we re-negotiated the format of the interview and the boundaries of what Tania was and was 'not ok' with talking about.

At the end of each interview and focus group I asked participants who had not previously participated in the survey to complete a short demographic questionnaire and gave them all a £10 gift voucher to say thank you for participating in the interview/ group. I also gave them a 'debrief' sheet explaining what would happen to the 'data' that they had just given me and providing them with details of organisations to contact if they wanted more information or support with any of the issues discussed (Appendix C). These 'formal' ethical procedures were useful props for negotiating consent and maintaining an ethic of care towards the young people that I was researching but they were not always valuable tools in practice (Heath et al 2009). In focus group three for example, the young men decided when to terminate the conversation and then swiftly left the room before I could ask them to complete a questionnaire, choose a 'fake name' for themselves or give them a £10 voucher. As a result the details provided about the young men in this group (See Appendix K) are based on the information provided informally by the youth worker who had worked with the young men for approximately five years.

To assist with the transcription of the recordings from the focus groups I used an assistant facilitator whose role it was to write down the first utterances of each conversational turn to ensure that each participant could be identified from the

recording (Brannen and Pattman 2005). I also asked the co-facilitators to note down their observations relating to body language, group dynamics and mood, which I subsequently included in the focus group transcripts. At the end of each group I recorded a de-briefing session with the co-facilitator during which we discussed and reflected on the group dynamics, notable interactions and emerging themes. In my analysis of the focus group data I have used these recordings and the field notes that I recorded after each group as tools for exploring the affective and interactive patterns at play in these encounters. For example, when analysing the transcript from focus group four I noted a tension in the dialogue between the participants' desire to construct a group account of 'good sex' as 'fun sex' and my desire to explore how 'serious' emotions fit into this account of good, fun sex. To explore this tension and reflect on my own role in constructing this account I found it useful to listen to the discussion that took place between my young female co-facilitator and I following this group. Listening to her enthusiasm and excitement in relation to the focus group discussion encouraged me to think beyond my own scepticism about the young women's celebratory account and think about the ways in which differences in age, sexuality and race shape the discussion in this encounter in contradictory and challenging ways (see chapter six).

In focus group three I did not use a co-facilitator as the group was arranged with short notice and I knew that there would be a youth worker and a sexual health outreach worker present and did not want the participants to feel crowded by the presence of further 'professionals'. This group discussion was the loudest and liveliest of the four groups and the young men continually spoke over each other and used colloquial language, jokes and loud noises that can be difficult to decipher in the recording. The transcription of this account is not as accurate as with the other focus groups and interviews, as can be seen in the data extracts

included in this thesis. This is one of the many examples of the tension I continually encountered between wanting to generate 'good' and useful data and wanting to make young people felt comfortable and relaxed during research encounters as part of 'good' ethical research practice.

Stage three: Interviews

In the final stage of fieldwork I conducted in-depth interviews with 16 young people in which I invited them to talk about themselves, their experiences of pleasure, their sexualities and their sexual experiences. These were all individual interviews except for one that was conducted with a young woman and a close friend who she asked to bring along to the interview. Prior to conducting these interviews I carried out two pilot interviews with young people volunteering at Brook to help me develop and adjust the interview approach described below (See Appendix H).

The focus of the research at this stage was on young people's *experiences* of sexual pleasure; what kinds of sexual experiences were the young people I interviewed having and how were they using these experiences as meaning-making resources? Throughout the research project young people had told me that personal experience and sexual experimentation were the most important method for learning about sexual pleasure. As one young man in an exploratory focus group had told me, '*You can hear about it, but...that's just hearing, but you have to actually experience it, to know, the real pleasure*' (See chapter one). At this stage of the research I was interested in taking this idea seriously and examining how this process of experiential sexual learning played out in the context of participants' lives and relationships.

At the start of each interview I explained to the participant that the interview would be loosely structured around four sections; *You*, *Things in your life that give you pleasure, Your sexuality,* and *Your sexual experiences,* with the final section focusing on *early/first sexual experiences, bad sexual experiences* and *pleasurable sexual experiences* (See Appendix L). I started each interview by asking young people to 'tell me about you and what's going on in your life at the moment', before moving on in conversation to the potentially more sensitive or difficult topics of pleasure and sexual experience, if they had not already emerged in the discussion. This interview method meant that I was able to generate data on young people's sexual experiences and understandings of pleasure as well as on aspects of the participants' biographies and the broader contexts of their lives. My invitation at the start of each interview for each participant to tell me their 'life story' drew on biographical narrative approaches to interviewing (Chamberlayne et al 2000, Kohler Riessman 2008) as well as psycho-social approaches (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) suggesting that in constructing a story of their lives participants provide insight into both the social and the psychic conditions of their lives.

Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008) describes narrative interviewing as a journey in which the researcher relinquishes control of the interview and follows the participant down her own path. Although I developed a four part sequential interview structure and accompanying set of key questions I wanted to ask each participant, I wanted to employ a flexible, participant centred approach and let the young person guide the conversation and to focus on the areas of their life, relationships and sexuality that they wanted to talk about. I hoped that this would help the young people I spoke with to feel more relaxed and comfortable when talking about potentially sensitive or taboo topics, as well as enabling them to set the agenda and to discuss issues relating to pleasure that I had not previously

thought of (Heath et al 2009). Adopting this narrative approach meant that in practice the interviews frequently did not follow the structure that I had developed. When interviewing Beyonce for example, the interview was cut short due to her 8 month old son's persistent crying and when I interviewed Tania we negotiated that I would only ask her about sections 1-3 of the 'schedule' as she said that she did not feel comfortable talking about her sexual experiences (see above).

Interview data analysis: case studies and clusters

Employing this narrative approach meant that I was able to generate data on young people's sexual experiences and understandings of pleasure but also on aspects of participants' biographies and the broader contexts of their lives. In my analysis of the interview data I have adopted a case-study approach, privileging participants' biographical narratives and exploring the ways in which these narratives were embedded in family, peer and community networks and shaped by race, class, gender and sexual inequalities (Thomson 2011). It was within these personal and social contexts that I proposed to make sense of participants' accounts of their sexual and pleasurable experiences.

To recruit interview participants I started by returning to the list of volunteers that I had generated five months previously from conducting the survey. I wanted the interview sample to include equal numbers of young men and young women who met the original research participation criteria of being aged 16 – 25, living, working, studying or accessing a service in Islington. My decision at this stage to continue to sample for maximum variation, rather than to focus on the experiences of one particular group of young people (i.e. young women, peer educators or LGBQ young people) means that the interviews were conducted with a group of

young people who were 'super-diverse' in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and sexual experience (see Appendix L), as well as in terms of their family backgrounds and educational experiences.

In my analysis of the interview data I have resisted categorising participants' interview accounts according to their gender, sexuality, ethnicity or social class as is more commonly practiced in research on young people's sexualities (Holland et al 1998, Tolman and Szalacha 1999, Thomson 2000b, Allen 2003, Maxwell and Aggleton 2012b). I have instead searched for ways to capture the diversity within the participant sample, exploring the ways in which these familiar categories of difference intersect in young people's accounts of how they have learnt about and experienced their sexualities and sexual desires. A key method for doing this has been to cluster participants' biographical interview accounts according to subjective categories of sexual experience: the virgins and sexual 'beginners', the couples and the sexual experimenters and explorers (See chapter six). In approaching my analysis in this way I hope both to contribute to debates on the significance of young people's sexual histories and experiences to their sexual values and practices (Wight et al 1994) and to debates about intersectionality and the need to capture experiences of living with 'super-diversity' and the more complex feelings of identity that this is claimed to engender (Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah 2010, McCall 2005).

Clustering the interview accounts in this way enabled me to explore three categories of sexual experience that emerged from my analysis of the data and to examine how participants invested in these categories and used them as resources for making sense of their experiences of sex, pleasure and desire (Thomson 2011, Connell 1995). Several of the interview accounts would not fit into

these three categories as the biographical narratives and 'sexual stories' (Plummer 1995) were more varied and fluid than the typology that I constructed (or another of the other typologies that I explored using) allowed for. Tania for example had recently separated from her boyfriend; she was not a 'virgin' and she was not in a 'couple' but unlike the cluster of single explorers she was not interested at that moment in her life in experimenting sexually or meeting a new sexual partner. Accounts such as Tania seemed to slip out of the typology that I created and are therefore not included in chapter six. As my discussion here suggests however, they have informed my analysis of the data and the ways in which categories of sexual experience play out in the face of biographical experience.

In developing my analytic approach to the interview accounts I have drawn on Ken Plummer's work (1995) on researching 'sexual stories' and the ways in which he applies theoretical insights from symbolic interactionism and critical realism to his work. Plummer suggests that these approaches offer a way of combining insights from postmodernism and social constructionism that truths are never fixed and always shifting, multiple and contested with a commitment to understanding the empirical world 'out there' that consists of embodied, passionate, thinking human subjects. In his introduction to *Telling sexual stories* Plummer passionately argues that 'stories are not simply 'languages' or 'texts' or even 'discourses'' but accounts of empirical human life that are 'socially produced in social contexts' (1995: 16, Smith 1987). Although people's sexual stories may be approached 'metaphorically' as a text, Plummer argues that they are 'texts embodied by breathing passionate people in the full stream of social life' (1995:16). I have found Plummer's work to be both useful and challenging; a passionate reminder to pay attention to materiality, emotion, embodiment and power in my analysis of participants'

accounts of their sexual experiences but also a challenging call to consider what I might 'know' about participants' thoughts, feelings and embodied experiences from the stories that they told to me in interviews and in focus groups to each other.

Coming to a conclusion; moving forwards

This chapter follows my methodological journey through the three stages of fieldwork documenting the different methods of data collection and analysis used. In the next three chapters of this thesis I present the findings from these analyses with a view to exploring how the young people who participated in this research understand and experience 'good sex'. The structure of this thesis reflects the way in which I have 'mixed' the different methods, which is to first analyse each data set separately and then bring the insights from each method together in the final chapter to address the research questions using 'multi-dimensional' perspectives (Mason 2006a). Presenting the data analyses in this way I hope to play to the strength of each method and allow its distinctive strengths and potential to flourish (Mason 2006a). In line with previous studies, my approach is guided by the 'feminist organizing principle of listening to and taking young women's [and young men's] voices seriously (Tolman and Szalacha 1999: 11) as well as by my interest in reflexively examining the potential of different methods for researching young people's understandings and experiences of 'good sex'. In the final chapter of the thesis I return to this discussion, bringing the empirical and methodological findings from each stage of the research into dialogue (Mason 2006a) to consider the possibilities and limitations of each method and to make suggestions for future research.

Chapter 4: Surveying 'good sex'

In this chapter I present an analysis of data from the survey of 278 young people conducted during the first stage of the research. The aim of the survey was to generate a research sample for subsequent research stages and to gain a broad overview of young people's understandings of 'good sex' and of sexual relationships and sexual learning. In the previous chapter I reflected on the ways in which I have used the survey data to feed into subsequent research stages and construct the focus group sample. I also provided a broad overview of the survey sample which I suggest reflects what we know about urban youth populations as highly mobile and 'super-diverse (Vertovec 2006, Fanshawe and Srikandarajah 2010). In this chapter I present analyses of data from the open-ended survey questions with a view to mapping patterns in participants definitions of 'good' and 'bad' sex and views on sex and relationships and sexual learning more broadly. Data from the first half of the questionnaire relating to participants' demographic characteristics and sex and relationship statuses are summarized in the appendix J and are used in this chapter to conduct cross tabulation analyses of the key themes presented below.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section I focus on the sources and resources that participants identify as influencing their understandings about sex and in the second I map patterns of sexual meaning and values in the data. More specifically I explore the strategies and concepts that participants use to define good and bad sex. This is followed by an account of the patterns of pleasure and risk in participants' questions and messages about sex and their stated hopes and fears for their future sex and relationship experiences. In each

section I use cross-tabulation analyses to explain some of the patterns of meaning and value in the data.

Learning and understanding: Mapping resources

One of the aims of the survey was to generate a map of the resources that young people were using to understand and learn about sex. Two of the survey questions related directly to this aim by asking participants to identify the 'kinds of things' that have *influenced* their view of what sex is or should be like and to indicate what they would do if they wanted to *understand* more about 'what sex is like'.

As visualised in the 'influence' tag cloud below (Figure 1), participants identified **friends, the media, personal experience** and **pornography** as key factors that *influence* their views about what sex is or should be like. Almost half of participants who responded to this question (47%)[10] stated that 'the media', or a specific type of media such as TV or magazines, influenced their views about what sex is or should be like. Participants rarely cited the media as the *sole* factor that influenced their views about sexuality however, as the example responses below suggest.

- Adverts. Documentaries. Parents. Life.
- Friends, TV, magazines (fashion - sex sells) Boyfriend/experience.
- Baywatch. Eurotrash. Dad. Playboy.

Other key influences are listed in table 1 below and include friends and personal life and sexual experiences as indicated in the above examples.

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[10] Unless otherwise stated, all percentages given are valid percentages.

Figure 1: Tag cloud of responses of questions 'What kinds of things influence your view of what sex is or should be like?'

about adverts advice bad basically baywatch been being bible books boy boyfriend boy brother can changed christian college could do documentaries don't e education enjoyable e eurotrash experience experienced experiences famil feel films friends from general go god going goo had has have having hear how i influenced instinct internet its just know learnt li like literature magazines mates me media movies music my nothing other others own parents past people person personal porn programmes relationships religion romantic say school sex sexual should shown shows society songs talking television thin through tv videos views watching what when women you your

Figure 2: Tag cloud showing responses to the question 'If you wanted to understand more about sex how would you find this out?'

21st 4 4yp 50 about actually adult advice advisor advisors all already an ask asking book booklets books clinic clinics do doctor don't education etc everything experience experienced experiences experiencing family first friend friends from get go google gp hand have having health i information internet know knows leaflets look mates maybe me more movies my myself need nurse older one ones online other others out parents people person personal porn programmes read reading relationships research search see sex sexual show sister someone sources speak talk talking things think through trusted tv visit watch website websites who wikipedia would you

Table 1: Factors identified by participants as influencing their views on sex (Total responses 232) [11]

Source of influence	Frequency (%)
Media	130 (47)
Friends	81 (29)
Personal experience	54 (19)
Porn	30 (11)
Family	24 (9)
Religion	14 (5)
Education / health services	11 (4)

Table 2: Resources and methods identified by participants for understanding more about what sex is or should be like (Total responses 238)

Resource for understanding	Frequency (%)
Look on the internet	90 (32)
Talk to a friend	59 (21)
Go to a clinic / GP	55 (20)
Personal experience	33 (12)
Read a book / leaflet	25 (9)
Talk to a family member	17 (6)
Talk to a sexually experienced person	14 (5)
Watch television	13 (5)
Watch pornography	10 (4)

When asked how they would go about *understanding* more about what sex is like, participants listed *resources* that they would use such as the **internet, friends** or the **sexual health clinic** and *practices* that they would engage in such as **asking, going, talking** and **experiencing**. This is visualised in the nouns and verbs that stand out in the tag cloud above. As the image also suggests, the **internet** was the most frequently cited resource for understanding more about what sex is or should be like, mentioned by one third (32%) of participants (see table 2).

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[11] Some responses contained more than one code and for this reason the total number of codes is higher than the total number of responses. For this reason frequency and percentage totals are not given. This applies to each table of analyses presented unless stated otherwise.

In the literature on sexuality education and learning, the distinction is often established between *formal* and *informal* or *official* and *unofficial* sources of sexual knowledge (Lees 1993, Epstein and Johnson, 1998, Kehily, 2002, Allen, 2001. See chapter one). Researchers have commented on the need for schools to use more informal approaches to sexuality education that use young people's sexual cultures and knowledge as a starting point for teaching and learning (i.e. Kehily, 2002, Allen, 2001) and on the ways in which young people are able to piece together information from different sources of knowledge in a 'jigsaw puzzle of sexual learning' (Kehily, 2002: 121, Thomson and Scott 1991: 27-31). Increasingly debates around sex education focus on the role of family and friends as informal providers of sex and relationships information and advice, for example through initiatives such as the FPA 's 'Speak easy' programme and Parent Line Plus's 'Time to talk' project (See Powell 2008, Walker 2004), and on the need for young people to develop media literacy skills to negotiate increasingly 'sexualised' media, often imagined as inherently dangerous and harmful (See Papadopoulos 2010, Attwood and Smith 2011).

The survey data suggest that participants see informal, unofficial resources of sexual knowledge such as the media, friends and their own sexual experiences as key *influences* on their views about sex, but that if they want to *understand* more about sex they would use both informal resources such as friends and their own experiences, and formal resources such as health services, books and leaflets. The internet occupies an ambiguous space within this formal / informal dichotomy since it contains sexual knowledge generated by a range of organisations and individuals whose identity and authority is often unclear. In the survey data participants refer both to a generic concept of the media and to specific media forms such as the internet and television, giving different levels of authority to

different media types. For example, although a third of participants stated that they would use the internet to *understand* more about what sex is like, only 8 participants stated that the internet *influenced* their views about sexuality. In reverse, whilst watching television was frequently cited by participants as *influencing* their views about sex, only 13 participants stated that they would watch television to *understand* more about what sex is or should be like. In her research with young people (17-19yrs) in New Zealand, Louisa Allen (2005a) asked her participants to rank how *useful* they found different sources of information about sex and how much they *used* these different resources. Allen's research suggests that media sources were widely *used* by participants but they tended to see other sources such as friends, parents and sex education as more *useful* sources of information. These findings suggest, as others have argued that young people are critical consumers of pornography and other sexualised media and are able to draw on a range of resources to piece together what is useful for their sexual learning (Bale 2011, Buckingham and Bragg 2004, Kehily 2002). As the above example responses suggest, participants rarely cited one resource as important to their sexual learning and 'sexualised' media examples such as 'playboy' or 'adverts' were given alongside personal relationships with parents and friends.

As set out in the literature review, there is a large body of feminist research on the gendering of sexual knowledge that explores the ways in which both formal and informal sources of sexual knowledge offer strikingly different messages to young men and young women and set up distinct accounts of male and female (hetero) sexuality (See Holland et al 1998). Lynda Measor (2004) for example argues that young men and young women have different access to information about sex and sexuality within their families which impacts on the sources of information they use, rely on and prefer. Based on research conducted over three decades, Measor

argues that whereas young women emphasise the importance of their families, almost always female relations, as sources of information about sex, young men learn about sex in ways that often exclude the family or trusted adults. This gendered pattern of sexual learning has been theorised within feminist research traditions in terms of social constructions of masculinity that require young men to present themselves to others as already knowledgeable and competent about sexual issues (Kehily 2001, Allen 2005, Holland, Ramazanoglu and Sharpe 1993).

The survey data supports the claim that young women are more likely to ask and to talk to others about sex than young men, who see the media and pornography as influential and the internet as a useful resource. There is limited evidence, however, that male or female participants perceive family members and relationships as sources of influence or resources for learning and understanding more about what sex is like. There is some variation in these data by participant ethnicity, with higher proportions of White and Mixed ethnicity young people citing family as *influencing* their views about sex, than young people from other ethnic groups. In chapter seven I present the insights from my analysis of the interview data which suggests that family and religious values are significant in shaping young people's understandings and expectations of sexual pleasure in ways that are classed, gendered and raced and bound up with stories of family migration and religious identity. These insights are somewhat contradicted by the data presented here, which suggest that only a minority of young people consider family or religion as important factors in influencing their views about sex or for finding out more about sex, even though over 60% of participants identified as being religious (see appendix J). Ros Gill (2009) has raised the question of why acknowledging cultural influence can be deemed so shameful and has suggested that within Western neoliberal cultures, admitting that we are 'influenced' by family

or religious values and cultural practices amounts to a failure to act as a free, rational and self-regulating subject. Following this argument it is perhaps not surprising that very few participants listed religious or family values as important influential factors, although this cannot account for variation by ethnicity.

Tables 3 and 4: Gender and sources of influence and understanding

Resources for understanding	Female %	Male %
Look on the internet	36	41
Talk to a friend	29	19
Go to a clinic / GP	27	16
Personal experience	14	14
Read a book / leaflet	14	5
Talk to a family member	8	7
Talk to a sexually experienced person	8	3
Watch television	3	9
Watch pornography	2	8

Sources of influences	Female %	Male %
Media	51	65
Friends	38	33
Personal experience	26	21
Porn	4	26
Family	11	12
Religion	7	5
Education /services	6	3

Learning from experience

In the introduction to this thesis I reflect on my experiences of conducting exploratory work with groups of young people in an outer London FE college. One of the insights from this work, which is supported by my analysis of the focus group data presented in the following chapter, is that the groups of young people who considered themselves to be sexually experienced drew extensively on their own experiences to talk and argue about what counts as 'good sex', whereas those young people with less sexual experience drew more readily on the

experiences and opinions of their peers and used TV programmes as discursive reference points.

Survey participants were asked to rate their level of sexual experience on a scale of 1-10 and to define themselves as 'currently sexually active', 'sexually active in the past, but not now' or as 'never sexually active' (See Appendix E). Participants were not given any guidance as to what these categories of 'activity' or levels of 'experience' may signify and the survey did not specify whether or not sexual experience was defined as with someone else. The aim of these questions was to generate data on participants' subjective self-perceptions and understandings, rather than to make an assessment of their sexual histories based on number of partners, or episodes of 'penis in vagina' sex (see Newby et al 2012). For cross-tabulation analyses, responses were categorised as low (1-3), medium (4-7) and high (8-10).

The survey data suggest that participants who considered themselves to be *highly* sexually experienced were less likely to cite professional services or friends as a resource for *understanding* more about sex and more likely to reference their own personal experiences, than those who stated that they had a low level of sexual experience. Similarly only 1 out of the 54 young people who stated that their personal experiences have *influenced* their views about what sex is or would be like, stated that she considered herself to have a low level of sexual experience.

Given the differential moral value given to male and female 'sexual experience' (see Lees 1986, Holland et al 1998, Skeggs 1997), it might be expected that young men would be more likely to value their own sexual experience as a resource for understanding and learning about sex. This is not supported by the

survey data, however, as similar proportions of the male and female sample stated that they consider their own sexual experiences as a resource for developing greater understanding about what sex is like and as a factor influencing their views about what sex is or should be like (see tables 3 and 4).

Introducing the category of sexual experience as a unit of analysis in making sense of the survey data points towards the complex ways that young people's engagement with peers and with media content are mediated by their own sexual and relationship experiences. These data highlight the need to explore further the ways in which personal sexual experiences may or may not influence a young person's views about sex or aid greater understanding about sexuality and to consider whether this is an area in which young people may or may not require support. To begin this process requires valuing young people's sexual knowledge and acknowledging, as Louisa Allen (2005a) has argued, that young people are sexual subjects with a right to explore sexually and to learn about sexuality in the present rather than in an imagined (adult) future (Alldred and David 2007).

Figure 3: Participants' views on influences on sex by level of sexual experience.
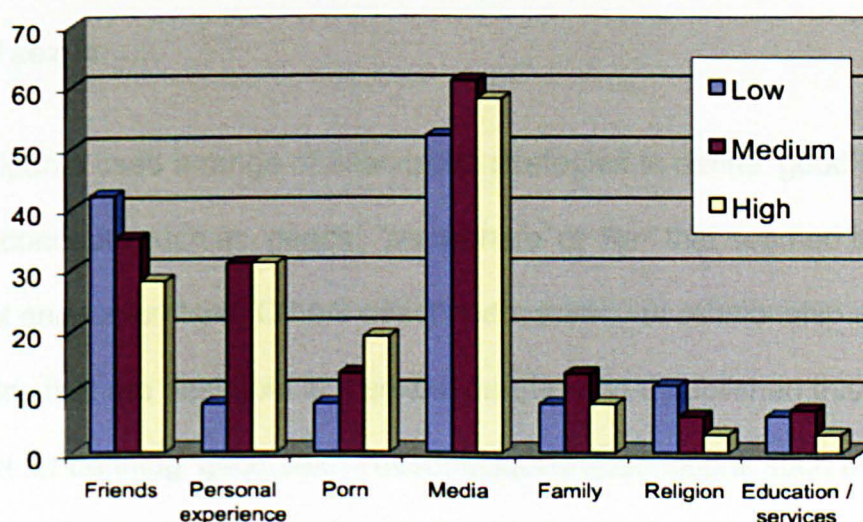
What is 'good sex'? Mapping meanings and values

Asking the open questions 'Good sex is....' /'Bad sex is...' generated diverse and wide ranging responses suggesting, as previous research has found, that participants have access to a variety of competing discourses that provide a framework for making distinctions between what counts as 'good' and 'bad' sex (Sharpe and Thomson 2005). In participants' definitions of good/bad sex and in the list of experiences they are looking forward to in the future there is evidence of traditional-restrictive, liberal-romantic and casual-recreational discourses (Ford 1991) often combined within one short survey response ('*Learning new positions. Eventually getting married and having children*'). Cross-tabulation of these variables suggests, however, that there are differences in who is able to access and employ these discourses of pleasure and risk, romance, sexual experimentation and mutuality. In the following section I map the range of competing discourses and concepts identified in the survey data. My aim is to provide an overview of what counts as 'good' and 'bad' sex in the survey data that privileges both the diversity of participants' responses and the patterns of meaning and difference in the data.

Good sex is.....

Participants used a range of descriptive strategies to define 'good sex'. Some listed concepts such as '*gentle*', '*passionate*' or '*fun*' that seemed to describe the sexual encounter itself. Others described a particular relationship context or qualities that are desirable in a sexual partner and established this as the key criteria for defining 'good sex.' These included descriptions such as good sex is '*with someone experienced*' or '*with someone you love and care about*'. Other

definitions described 'good sex' in terms of a particular individual experience – good sex is *when I buss my nut[12]*, *'when I'm left shivering in the bed!'* – or a particular shared experience, good sex *'when you both are satisfied and pleasured'*. The tag cloud generated from responses to this question (see figure 4) visualizes these different approaches to defining 'good sex', foregrounding both key concepts such as **love, enjoyment** and **fun**, as well as foregrounding the words **when, you, someone** and **both** that point towards the importance of partners, relationships and shared experiences in making distinctions between good and bad sex.

Figure 4: Tag cloud of responses to the question 'Good sex is…'

about again all amazing an bed being best body **both** brilliant can care caring climax **comfortable** communication condom connecting connection consensual dirty do doing each emotionally enjoy **enjoyable** enjoying exciting experienced experimental feel feeling feelings feels foreplay from **fun** get girl girlfriend going **good** great happy have having healthy him hot i i'm **intimate** involved its know lasting like long **love** loves loving **making** man me meaningful nice one orgasm orgasms other partner partners **passionate** people **person** pleasurable pleasure relationship right **romantic** safe satisfied satisfying **sex** she **someone** time trust two very want what **when** who willing woman **you** your

Open coding survey responses and quantifying key themes shows that **love, enjoyment, fun, passion** and **intimacy or connection with a partner** were the most frequently evoked concepts in participants' definitions of 'good sex'. These analyses are summarized in table 5 below along with example responses for each key theme. As these examples suggest, many of the responses evoked multiple, overlapping criteria for defining 'good sex'; one 19-year-old woman for example

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[12] "Buss my nut' is a colloquial term for male orgasm.

describes 'good sex' as *'loving'* and *'romantic'* as well as *'passionate'* and *'orgasmic'*.

Bad sex is...

Participants defined 'bad sex' in a range of different ways that can broadly be categorized as those that evoked the *absence of a desired quality* such as pleasure or enjoyment; those that defined bad sex in terms of the *presence of an undesirable quality* such as force, boredom, or discomfort; and those that described an *undesirable situation or context* within which to have sex, such as sex with someone you don't know or sex whilst drunk. As the examples below indicate, several participants defined bad sex using more than one of these descriptive strategies:

> Bad sex is ... Empty, not consented, not fun
>
> Fumbling. Someone you don't know that well.

The tag cloud (figure 5) suggests that concepts of force, boredom and the 'one night stand' are important to participants' understandings of 'bad sex'. Open coding of these responses shows that **lack of consent, lack of intimacy and/or pleasure** and **sex with an undesirable partner** or **in a casual encounter** were the most frequently used criteria for defining 'bad sex'. These frequency coding analyses are summarized in table 6 below[13].

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[13] As the table shows, the number of responses for each 'bad sex' code is small suggesting that the coding framework only captures the definitions provided by a minority of participants. To explore further what 'un-coded' participants might be saying about 'bad sex' I returned to the 'un-coded' responses and looked for other themes and patterns that I may have missed. These analyses testified to the diversity of the data, although did enable me to identify some further themes such as sex when you or your partner lacks experience (8), when sex is unsafe or unprotected (6), sex when you are drunk (5) sex that is painful (2) or when you are 'not in the mood' (5).

Figure 5: Tag cloud of responses to question 'Bad sex is.... '

aint an around arrow awkward bad being bored boring can care cold condom connection consensual dick disappointing do doesn't doing don't drunk effort embarrassing emotional emotions enjoyable enjoyed enjoying feel feeling forced fun get girl good happy hard has have having i inexperienced isn't just know like love makes me mood much night non nothing obviously one opposite other painful partner partners peer people person pleasure pressure pressured quick random rape really reason relationship rushed sake satisfied selfish sex short sleeping small someone something stand stands times tired too un uncomfortable under unprotected violent what when who without you your

Table 5: Definitions of 'good sex'

Good sex	Freq (%)	Example response
Love	46 (19)	Good sex is with someone you love and trust
Enjoyment	28 (11)	Good sex is meaningful, enjoyable for both
Intimacy	21 (9)	Good sex is when there is a connection
Fun	21 (9)	Good sex is when they are both having fun
Passion	20 (8)	Good sex is loving, passionate, romantic, orgasmic
Time	15 (6)	Good sex is lasting, reaching climax, exhausting
Romance	13 (5)	Good sex is nice and romantic
Comfort	12 (5)	Good sex is comfortable, not embarrassing, private.
Safety	12 (5)	Good sex is fun, safe, meaningful (for both people)
Care	11 (5)	Good sex is respectful, sensitive, caring.
Orgasm	9 (4)	Good sex is long and multiple orgasms.

Table 6: Definitions of 'bad sex'

Bad sex code	Freq (%)	Example response
No consent	37 (16)	Bad sex is forced, pressure, not enjoyable for one party
No emotion / intimacy	26 (12)	Bad sex is distant
No pleasure / enjoyment	24 (11)	Bad sex is very jerky, painful, no pleasure
With wrong / undesirable partner	24 (11)	Bad sex is with the wrong person
Casual sex	23 (10)	Bad sex is a one night stand – shag.
Too short	19 (8)	Bad sex is short and no orgasm
Boring	17 (8)	Bad sex is boring and dangerous
Generic 'bad'	16 (7)	Bad sex is bad
Uncomfortable	12 (5)	Bad sex is when they don't respect you and you don't feel comfortable
Meaningless	11 (5)	Bad sex is when you are just having sex with that person and it don't mean nothing

Good sex: gendered languages of love, sex and reciprocity

Using the survey data I have been able to explore whether there are any gender differences in definitions of good and bad sex. These analyses cannot capture the tangled and contradictory languages of sexuality and their relationship to masculinity and femininity as has been documented in related qualitative work (i.e. Holland et al 1998. See chapter two). These analyses do however enable me to map patterns of gender difference and to explore, for example, the ways in which discourses of love and romance continue to give value or legitimacy to sexual experience in ways that are distinctly gendered. The love story as a narrative of sexual experience has been critiqued by feminist scholars for the ways in which it encourages female passivity and sexual innocence and romanticizes the concept

of mutuality in a social context of unequal gendered power relations (See Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs 1986). Many empirical studies have confirmed that traditionally gendered sexual stereotypes about sex and love reflect the reality of sexual experience for many young people - young women's motivations and understandings of sex centre on love, intimacy, commitment and relationships, whilst young men are more concerned with physical pleasure and sexual prowess (Rosenthal et al 1998:36, Moore and Rosenthal 1993, Abrahams et al 1990, Steward 1996, Holland et al 1998, Thompson 1995).

The survey data would appear to uphold this gendered pattern, with more young women evoking the concepts of love and romance to define 'good sex' than young men, and more young women stating that they are looking forward to falling in love or being in love in the future. Fifty-one of the 58 participants who defined 'good sex' in terms of love or romance were young women (36% of the female survey sample and 6% of the male survey sample). Similarly 19% of young women stated that they were looking forward to 'falling in love' or 'making true love', compared with 5% of young men. The evidence does not suggest, however, that understanding 'good sex' in terms of love and romance is a consensus view among the young women who participated in the survey, since 64% of young women who responded to this question did not define 'good sex' in terms or love or romance and several of those who did combined the languages of love and romance with other concepts such as enjoyment, passion, orgasm and dirt.

> Good sex is.... loving, enjoyable, fun
>
> loving and passionate, romantic, orgasmic
>
> rough but romantic
>
> passionate, romantic, dirty

As well as mapping gender binaries in understandings of love and romance, the survey data also suggests the fluidity of these traditionally gendered concepts and the ways in which they form part of a broader and more diverse set of conceptual and linguistic resources that young women draw on (Allen 2003). These data support findings from qualitative research documenting patterns of change and continuity in relation to young people's gendered sexual values (Holland and Thomson 2010. See chapter one). Louisa Allen found in her research with young people in New Zealand for example that discourses of love and romance were prevalent in young women's interview accounts of their sexual relationships, but they were not the only ways within which young women talked about their sexual selves and sexual relationships (Allen 2003). Allen's survey data mapped a similar picture; young women stated that trust, honesty and respect, caring, understanding and support, fun and commitment were all qualities that were wanted as much as, or more than love, within a heterosexual relationship.

Other key concepts that participants used to define 'good sex' were not gendered in the same way as concepts of love and romance, with equal proportions of female and male participants evoking concepts of enjoyment (11%/12%) and intimacy (8%/10%) to characterize 'good sex'. The other key theme in participants' definitions of 'good sex' showing variation by gender was 'fun'; 18 of the 21 participants who defined 'good sex' in terms of fun were young women. The 'feminisation' of fun in popular media and in young women's accounts of their sexual relationships and social lives has been documented elsewhere (Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 2007, Hollowell 2010) and linked to the emergence of new post-feminist discourses of femininity and female sexuality that privilege concepts freedom, fun and celebration (McRobbie 1996, 2009). In the following chapter I

explore the ways in which this discourse of young feminine sexual fun is taken up

and performed in an all female focus group as a way of negotiating moral

contradictions around female sexuality and celebrating female sexual freedom and

pleasure.

Table 7 and 8: Definitions of good and bad sex by gender

Good sex	Female / Male %
Love / Romance	36 / 6
Fun	12 / 3
Mutuality	10 / 12
Enjoyment	11 / 12
Intimacy	8 / 10

Bad sex	Female / Male %
No consent	23 / 7
No emotion	15 / 6
No pleasure / enjoyment	14 / 6
Casual sex	11 / 9
Too short	9 / 8
Boring	7 / 8

Previous studies have suggested that young men are more likely to understand

sexuality in terms of their own sexual performance and pleasure and that young

women are more likely to evaluate sex in terms of male performance and

pleasure, or the more romantic concept of mutuality and shared experience

(Holland et al 1998). The survey data provide mixed evidence of these patterns.

Overall, 40% of participants defined 'good sex' in relation to the qualities of a

partner or a relationship, 6% defined good sex as an individual, pleasurable

experience and just over half defined 'good sex' conceptually (i.e. good sex is

'enjoyable') with no reference to whether this was an individual or a shared

experience. A slightly *higher* proportion of young women defined 'good sex'

relationally, compared with young men (43% / 38%) but similar percentages of

females and males defined 'good sex' as an individually enjoyable experience (6%/5%). Further, a slightly *higher* proportion of young men defined 'good sex' as an explicitly shared or mutually pleasurable experience (12%/10%) whereas a handful of heterosexual young men defined 'good sex' as 'when she's happy' or 'when you make a girl cum', none of the female participants defined 'good sex' in terms of their partner's pleasure or orgasm.

Feminist research and scholarship has raised questions about whether the rhetoric of the reciprocity and the 'mutual exchange' of orgasm is necessarily a 'good thing' (Braun et al 2003) that signals the development of more egalitarian and reciprocal standards (Vance 1984: 12). The survey data enables me to identify whether or not participants understand 'good sex' as a mutual, shared or interdependent experience and to establish that there is limited gender difference in this discourse of mutuality. Analyses of participants' definitions of 'bad sex' however complicate this apparent shift away from traditionally gendered erotics of mutuality and instrumentalism. Whereas 23% of young women defined 'bad sex' in terms of force, pressure, rape or lack of mutual consent, this was only mentioned by 6% of young men, suggesting that discourses of sexual violence and victimhood continue to characterise young people's understandings of good/bad sex in highly gendered ways.

Cross tabulations of participants' definitions of 'good sex' suggest that the difference between those participants who define 'good sex' as a mutual experience, and those who do not, has more to do with their age and perceived level of sexual experience, than gender. The analyses suggest that a greater proportion of young people who identify as sexually active and/ or highly sexually experienced define 'good sex' as a shared experience or as an experience that is

contingent on a partner's positive qualities, than those who have never been sexually active or consider themselves to have low levels of sexual experience. For example, only 7 of the 27 young people who defined 'good sex' as an explicitly shared experience stated that they were not sexually active. This suggests that young people who have been sexually active are more likely to define 'good sex' through placing it in an embodied or relational context, whereas for young people who have not yet been sexually active, the concept of 'good sex' remains abstract or conceptual. These analyses provide some support for the claim made by young people in the pilot focus groups that you learn about sexual pleasure through your own sexual experience, or at least that sexual experience enables you to imagine and describe relational and embodied contexts that were previously less familiar. This raises the question of whether the ability to define 'good sex' as a mutual or shared experience signifies awareness of egalitarian standards or greater descriptive and imaginative capacity. In the following two chapters I return to this complicated terrain to explore in more detail the ways in which gendered patterns of mutuality, selfishness and altruism shape young people's understandings and experiences of 'good sex' and the ways in which these are complicated and compounded by participants' sex and relationship experiences, and family and cultural backgrounds.

Janet Holland and colleagues argue that most young people have access to a range of ways of talking about sex, relationships and love and can move between these in ways that reflect the contradictions and discontinuities of everyday sexual and gender identities and relationships (Holland et al 1998: 77). They also argue however that there are differences in the ways that young people talk about sexuality that can be accounted for in terms of a young person's gender, but also in terms of their language skills and family background. Based on their interviews

with young men and young women the authors of the WRAP and MRAP studies found that working class young men may be particularly likely to express an instrumental language of sexuality and middle class young women may be more likely to articulate a discourse of negotiation and mutuality.

Overall there is very limited evidence of an instrumental language of sexuality in young men's responses in the survey data. The diversity of male respondents' definitions of 'good sex' suggests that young men are able to draw on a wide range of conceptual and linguistic resources that go beyond the 'ritualized banter' of the male peer group (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002). Although a quarter of young men's responses were relatively generic ('good', 'what you like', 'enjoyable'), another quarter were passionate and evocative, often providing detailed and affective descriptions such as those detailed below.

- exciting, 2 hour lasting, comfortable, mind blowing
- satisfying, immersive, exciting, varying.
- When you are not thinking in your head that it's all wrong when you feel that passion, when it's all new and you're getting to know their body.

The analysis suggests that these kinds of passionate definitions (those that evoke a sense of passion or that use the concept of passion to define good sex) were more common in young men's responses than young women's (24%/16%). Further, these definitions far outnumbered those that defined 'good sex' in instrumental terms such as – 'when I buss my nut' or sex 'with a 'good looking bird - girlfriend'. In the box below I list the words and concepts that appeared only *once* in the data on male respondents definitions of 'good sex' as a way of showcasing

the diversity of young men's responses in particular and the diversity of participants' definitions overall.

Figure 6: Words / concepts appearing only once in participants' responses to the question 'Good sex is…'

Meaningful	Crazy
Mind blowing	Intense
Unifying	Immersive
Release	Varying
Spiritual	Shivering
Makes my body refreshed	Unexpected
Spontaneous	Constant
Hot	Wanted
Energetic	

The survey did not collect data on class background and I am therefore unable to describe the relationships between participants' class backgrounds and definitions of good/bad sex. I am however able to map some patterns in social and educational background by organizing data according to the institutional location at which the surveys were administered. For example, by comparing responses from the eight young men at a training centre for young people who have been out of education/ employment and who have low levels of literacy and numeracy and the nine young men at a prestigious university (see table 9 below).

The young men's different levels of literacy and education are reflected in their written definitions of 'good sex', in that the young men from the university have a more sophisticated and broader vocabulary. The comparison of these two sets of responses foregrounds the limitations of a method that relies on young people's literacy skills to generate knowledge about sexual values and beliefs. At the final stage of the research I conducted interviews with two young men from the training

centre and one from the university and found that all three young men talked eloquently and at length about their emotional experiences of falling in love and having different sexual experiences and relationships (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002). For Oscar and Tommy, for example, poor literacy and a chequered educational background did not translate into emotional illiteracy or an inability to capture in language the pain and pleasure of their sexual and other experiences.

Table 9: Definitions of 'good sex' by male respondents provided at two survey sites

Young men at training centre	Young men at university (2)
Someone who is experienced	The best orgasm yet
Intercourse	Great, hot, intimate, energetic
When I'm very aroused and I like the girl	When you please your partner
Brilliant	When you both climax
Excellent	When you both are satisfied and feel amazing.
When it is pleasurable	Wild but tamed, passionate
Great	A strong connection
Trying new things	Exciting, intimate, unifying, release, spiritual
	Two people actively pleasuring each other at the same time for the contentment of the other

In their account of the 'gendered languages' of love and sexuality that emerged from their analysis of the data from the WRAP and MRAP studies, Janet Holland and colleagues argue that the public language of the peer group forces a gender division between sex and love that young people must respond to (1998: 90). They argue that 'in private, men may express vulnerability and emotion and women may express sexual desire and agency, without transgressing the public contours of gender' *(ibid.)*. In public however, young women and young men have to negotiate the public 'truth' that women are more interested than men in finding love and

romance, and that men are more concerned than women with sexual pursuit (*ibid..* See also Allen 2005a, Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002).

In my research the survey was neither a 'public' nor 'private' method; at times it was completed silently by young men who were sitting on their own, or who shielded their answers from their friends or partner. On other occasions young men chatted and ridiculed each other whilst completing the survey, or asked questions to me or to other practitioners who were helping them to complete the surveys in ways that often generated interesting discussions about what counts as 'good sex' and what it is possible to say about pleasure in particular group or public settings (See chapter seven).

Pleasure and risk: Asking questions, delivering messages

Participants were asked to write down a 'confidential question' they would like to ask a 'sex and relationships expert'. This question returned the highest no response rate with only 51% of participants (142) providing a 'question' in response. Asking young people to write an anonymous question is a technique that is frequently used in sex education sessions as a way of enabling young people to ask questions that they feel too embarrassed or intimated to ask in a group setting[14]. I had therefore assumed that this would be a familiar and straightforward practice for participants, but during piloting and fieldwork young people frequently commented that they couldn't 'think of anything', or asked me to help them think of a question to write. The difficulty this process apparently posed for participants raised questions about how best to facilitate opportunities (in both

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[14] This is something that I observed sexuality educators doing with young people and frequently heard discussed at various training days, practitioner forums etc.

research and education settings) for young people to identify gaps in their knowledge and articulate areas of interest or concern.

Despite the low response rate to this question, I found the data useful for providing insight into participants' concerns and expectations in relation to sex and relationships and for mapping key points of desire and contention in the quest for knowledge relating to sexual pleasure. Further I have used several of these 'questions' to make discussion cards, which I used in a focus group activity with three groups of young people during stage two of the research (See chapter three) and in training for practitioners in how to respond to questions about pleasure and to help them think through ways in which conversations about pleasure could be made possible.

The 'questions' generated covered a range of topics from asking *'how to cure BV'* (Bacterial vaginosis), asking *'is it normal not to orgasm during sex'* to asking *'why relationships are so hard to be in, in society today'*. Participants' responses can be broadly categorised into questions relating to *sexual pleasure, sexual risk* and *relationships.* Re-coding the data demonstrated that 58% of the 142 responses were questions relating to sexual pleasure, 21% relate to the risks of having sex and 9% ask for advice or an opinion about relationships. Only five of the responses ask questions about the pleasures *and* the risks of having sex.

Questions relating to the risks of having sex focused on health concerns such as pregnancy, contraception and sexual transmitted infections (STIs). These questions asked for specific medical information, such as: *Can you get pregnant when having sex for the first time? Can you catch at STI if you (sic) having oral sex?* Or an informed opinion or advice, such as: *Is using the pill a good idea? Is*

anal [sex] safe? These 'risk' questions were more common among participants who identified as never having been 'sexually active' and as having a low or medium level of sexual experience. 44% of participants who stated that they had never been sexually active raised a 'risk' question, compared with 11% and 19% of participants who identified as being sexually active in the past or as currently sexually active. Similarly, a higher proportion of participants who identified as being currently or previously sexually active or as having a medium or high level of experience asked questions relating to sexual pleasure.

Figure 7: Variations in participants' pleasure and risk questions, by level of sexual experience (SE).

Participants risk and pleasure "questions" by level of SE.
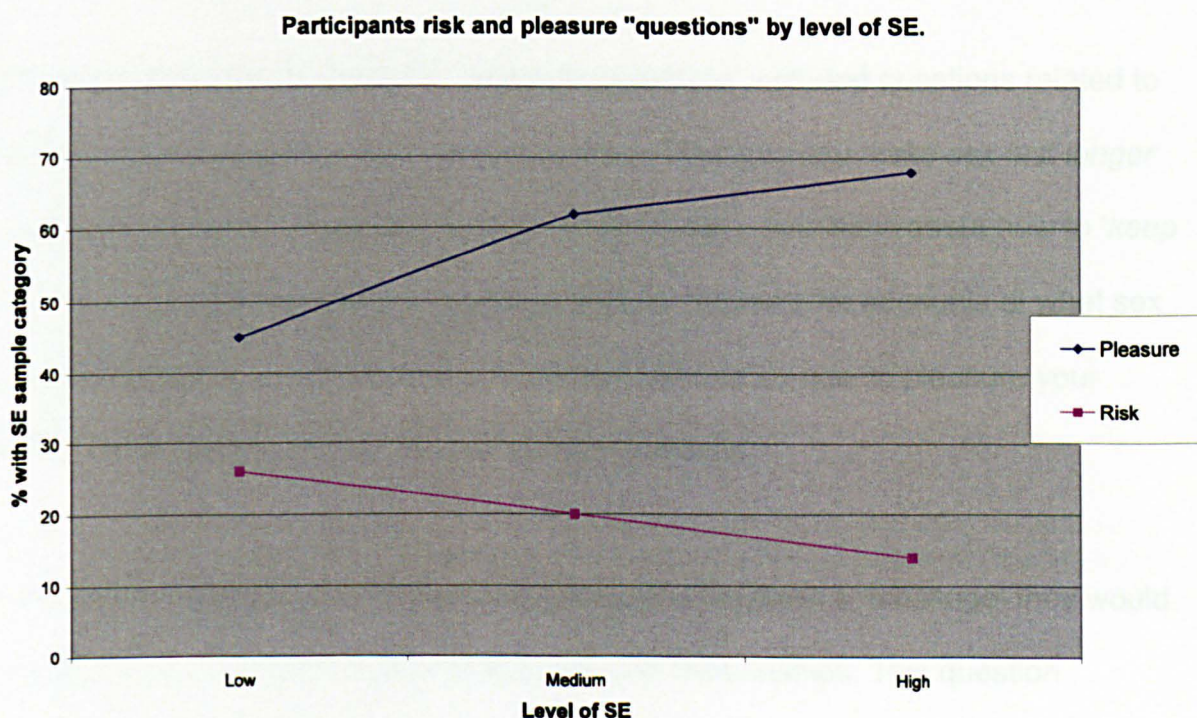
A total of 87 participants raised questions relating to sexual pleasure and how to enjoy or improve sexual experience or how to try out particular sexual activities or positions. The most commonly raised 'pleasure topic' was orgasm, which was raised by 17 young women and 7 young men. The majority of these orgasm

questions – 5 of the young men's and 13 of the young women's – asked for information or advice relating to female orgasm:

- I've been having sex for a year and I still haven't orgasmed - is this normal? *(18 yr, female, heterosexual)*
- How to make a girl have an orgasm quickly *(16 yr, male, no data on sexual identity)*
- Is it possible to have an orgasm with just penetration for every woman? And if it is, how? *(20 yr, female, bisexual)*
- Why do girls lie and fake orgasm? *(18 yrs, male, heterosexual)*

Other key topics in participants' 'pleasure questions' included questions related to 'lasting' or how to prolong sexual intercourse - *How can you make sex last longer naturally?*' or '*how to keep going longer than usual?*', questions about how to '*keep sex alive*' or '*fix the bad times in bed*' as well as requests for accounts of what sex '*feels like*' and for tips, advice and recommendations on how to pleasure your partner or how to perform particular sexual practices.

The final survey question asked participants to write down a 'message' they would like to give to their own children about sex and relationships. This question generated a notably higher number of responses than the 'think of a question about sex and relationships' question, suggesting that participants found it easier to generate potential knowledge for younger children and position themselves as moral educators than to generate desired knowledge for themselves and position themselves as sexual learners with an interest in acquiring or improving their sexual expertise.

The content of the responses to these two questions varied considerably, as the tag clouds below (figures 8 and 9) suggest. Whilst participants' 'questions' for themselves were dominated by queries about what sex feels like and how to improve sexual experience, their 'messages' for their children were predominantly concerned with trying to prevent, delay or control the risks of sexual activity.

Figure 8: If you had the chance to ask one confidential question to a sex and relationships 'expert' what would it be?

3 about after all always an anal any ask average become bed been best better boy boys can can't cheat cheating contraception could cum dangerous different do does during ever experience experienced experiences fake feel feeling first from get girl girlfriend girls go good guys had hard have having healthy hiv how hurt i idea i've just keep know last like long longer love make male man me meant more most much my oral orgasm orgasms please pleasure pregnant quickly relationship safe same sex sexual should still than them think time way what when why woman women would

Figure 9: Tag cloud showing responses to questions 'If / when you have children, what messages about sex and relationships would you want them to learn?

18 able about afraid after age all always anyone anything bad before being best can careful children comfortable condom condoms consequences contraception do doing don't everyone everything feel first forced from get go good have having her i its just know learn life like love make married me my one only out partner person positive pressure protect protection ready really relationship relationships respect responsible right rush safe sex should shouldn't sleep someone something sure take talk tell them themselves thing things till time too trust truth understand until use wait want what when would you young your you're yourself

Analysis of participants' 'messages' to their children identifies three key categories of message: be safe; delay having sex; and be sex positive. Over 100 of the 245 'messages' that participants provided advised their future (or existing[15]) offspring to be 'safe', to be 'careful', or to use contraception when having sex. A third of the responses (74) indicated that participants would tell their children to wait or delay having sex, offering a range of markers that children should observe when choosing whether to wait or to start having sex (see table 11 below). A smaller number of 'messages' (45) indicated that the participant would adopt a positive approach to talking about sex with their children, urging their children to 'enjoy' sex and emphasising the need to be 'open and honest' with children and to circumvent the embarrassment, shame and fear surrounding sex. This 'sex positive' approach was more common with young people aged 20 and over and with young people from White British and European ethnic backgrounds. Greater proportions of young people who were sexually active or in a relationship indicated that they would emphasise the positive aspects of sex to their children, but there was no variation by level of sexual experience.

Many of the meanings and values noted in response to other survey questions such as enjoyment, fun, love and intimacy, rarely appeared in participants' messages to their children, which were instead dominated by instructions to have safe sex and delay the onset of sexual activity. Whilst a number of participants stated that their own sexual experiences were an important factor in how they learnt about sex and relationships, only two participants stated that they would encourage their own children to 'learn through experience'. This suggests that discourses of pleasure, fun, experimentation and enjoyment can more readily be

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[15] 23 of the 278 participants stated that they have children, therefore the majority of responses refer to imagined future offspring.

framed around participants' own past and future experiences, than around the figure of their real or imagined future child(ren).

Stevi Jackson (1982) has argued that the idea of the 'true sexual freedom' of children can only be a utopian desire in the context of contemporary attitudes towards children and sexuality. She argues that we regard 'children as a special category of people and sexuality as a special area of life' meaning that bringing the two together readily provokes moral outrage and explosive, righteous indignation (Jackson 1982: 2). Jackson explains these reactions in terms of a response to the breaking of 'a particularly powerful social taboo: that children and sex should be kept apart' (ibid.) As Stevi Jackson and others have remarked, there are many 'rules and conventions that exist to define sex as the preserve of adults', such as age of consent laws and selective censorship practices (Jackson 1982: 3, Thomson 2000a). In their survey responses, very few participants draw on legal 'rules' to mark out the appropriate line between waiting and starting to have sex, with only six participants referring to marriage and seven to specific age criteria. Rather, participants' messages refer to the concepts of care and safety or readiness, rushing and rightness to map out an often ambiguous terrain of moral timeliness and self-respect around what counts as good sex (Thomson 2000a).

Table 10: Key codes in participants' messages for children.

Code	Freq (%)	Example responses
Safe sex	106 (43)	Better to be safe then sorry so always use protection. USE A CONDOM!!!
Delay	74 (30)	Wait until your ready and don't rush things WAIT!
Sex positive	45 (18)	It's wonderful / shouldn't be abused but rather worshipped. To come and talk to me about ANYTHING they are worried about, because secrets on sex and relationship may not produce the best results.

Table 11: Wait until when? Participants' responses coded as 'delay'

Participant responses	Freq
Wait until it's 'right'	**19**
Right person	11
Right time	5
Right feeling	3
Wait until you are 'ready'	**16**
Don't rush	**13**
Wait for the 'correct' age	**15**
- 18 years	3
16 years old	2
20 years old	1
21 years old	1
- 'not too young'	3
'not too early'	1
- The 'correct'	1
'Reasonable'	1
'Respectable'	1
' Certain' age	1
Wait until marriage	**6**

Table 12: Participants' questions for a sex and relationship 'expert'

Focus of question	Freq (%)
Pleasure	82 (58)
Pleasure and risk	5 (4)
Risk	30 (21)
Relationships	13 (9)
Uncoded	12 (9)
Total responses	142

Table 13: Focus of participants' health 'risk' questions

Risky question topics	Freq
Pregnancy	8
Contraception	7
Generic risks	7
STIs	5
Pain during sex	3
HIV	2
Anal sex	1
Infertility	1
Cervical Cancer	1
Total	35

Table 14: Pleasure questions: topics addressed

Pleasure topic	Freq	Example responses
Orgasm	24	What's the best way to orgasm? Do all women orgasm?
Sexual timing - frequency and duration of sex	16	How do you last longer? How much time do I have to spend on it?
Sexual expectations - what sex feels like	11	What to expect from first intimate sexual experience? Does it hurt? How does it feel?
Tips and advice – how to improve / maintain good sex life	9	If you fed up of sex, what's next? Does it get boring after 30 years?
Partner's pleasure	8	Best way to pleasure another bloke! (G spot) How to please a woman.
Sexual positions / practices	7	What's the most comfortable way to start having anal sex? How to propose a 4-some (3 women, 1 guy)
Sex and emotions	3	Can you have sex without feeling for the other person? Is it usual to feel depressed after sex?
Sexual body – the vagina	2	The average size of a woman's clitoris How do you make your vagina tighter
Uncoded	7	How to talk about having better sex? Is it good or bad?
Total	87	

Having and getting: Hopes and concerns for the future

The survey asked participants to write down what they were looking forward to about their future sex and relationship experiences and what concerns they had about their future sex and relationship experiences. A key theme in participants' hopes for the future was the desire to experiment sexually and develop an increasing sense of sexual competence.

- Experimenting/ trying new things. Being adventurous

- In sex by improving my abilities, the relationships are always an enigma, you can't be sure of anything.
- Doing things together and as a whole being more experimental in life as time goes by.

This desire was articulated by 27% of the young women who responded and 20% of young men. A similar proportion of young men (17%), but a smaller proportion of young women (11%) stated that they were looking forward to having a particular sexual experience or to trying out a specific activity such as *'new positions'*, having oral or *'group sex'*.

Figure 10: Tag cloud showing responses to the question 'What are you most looking forward to about your future sex and relationship experiences?

3 about activity adventurous all alone also always am an anything babies being better bond both bussing can can't car care carry children comfortable connection continuing crazy doing each emotional even everything experience express family feeling finally finding forward from fun getting girls good great happy having how i i'm intimately keeping kids know learning life like loads long looking love man marriage married maybe me meeting mind moment more mouth my new nothing old other partner person pleasurable positions really relationship right sex sexual sharing so term them things toys trust trying variety what when who would you your

Figure 11: What worries do you have about future sex and relationship experiences?

able about after age aids all am an another anxious any anything arrow attractive baby bad being body bored bothered broken catching caught change cheat diseases do don't down enjoy enough erection etc experience feeling find forced from future getting girl go good happy having heart history hiv how hurt i i'm impotence infections its just kids less lie long man may me might moment much my n naked none nothing old orgasm other out partner people person pointing pregnancy pregnant ready

In the tag clouds (Figures 10 and 11) created from survey responses it is the verbs **having** and **getting** that stand out, suggesting a sense of loss and gain, pleasure and risk in responses. Key themes in participants' hopes for the future include the desire to *have* a lasting relationship, to *have* children, to fall in love, to *have* more, or to start *having*, generally good or specific pleasurable sexual experiences (i.e. *'to have a good sexual relationship'*, *'for it to be good'*). The data on participants' concerns for the future document the risks and negative consequence of pursuing these desires: *getting* an STI, *getting* pregnant, relationship breakdown, *getting* bored, infidelity and sexual inadequacy (see table 16 below).

Previous research has documented that young people are more concerned about preventing pregnancy than preventing HIV or sexually transmitted infections, leading to difficulties in encouraging young people to use condoms as opposed to non-barrier methods of contraception (Abel and Brunton 2005, Williamson, Buston and Sweeting 2009). The survey data suggest that both young men and young women are more concerned about STIs than pregnancy, perhaps reflecting the increasing policy focus on the rising rates of STIs among the under 25s, which led to initiatives such as the National Chlamydia Screening Programme launched in 2004.

As with participants' definitions of 'Good sex' *love* emerges from the data as a distinctly female desire - 24 of the 28 participants who stated that they were looking forward to falling or being in love were female. There were limited gender differences in other key themes however; equal proportions of male and female respondents stated they were looking forward to having children, to having good or lasting relationships and to having future pleasurable sexual experiences. Young women expressed more concern about their future sex and relationship

experiences than young men however, with 20% of the young men stating that they had 'no concerns' or 'nothing' to worry about compared with 12% of young women. Although equal proportions of male and female respondents stated they were looking forward to being in a lasting relationship (21%/21%), a higher proportion of young women reported being worried about the relationship breaking down or ending (20%/12%). More young men worried about being sexually inadequate in the future than young women, in particular not being able to 'get an erection', and whilst a third of both young men and young women stated that they were worried about getting an STI, a notably higher proportion of young women reported being worried about pregnancy (See table 16).

Table 15: Participants' hopes for their future sex and relationship experiences

Hope	Frequency (%)	Female %	Male %
Sexual experimentation / learning / increased competence	51 (24)	27	20
A positive / lasting couple relationship	44 (21)	16	17
Having (more) enjoyable/ good sexual experiences	35 (17)	21	21
Having children	32 (15)	15	15
Having specific sexual experience(s)	29 (14)	11	17
Love	28 (13)	19	5
Intimacy / closeness	21 (8)	9	6

Table 16: Participants' concerns about future sex and relationship experiences

Concern	Count	Female %	Male %
STIs	72 (31)	30	33
Pregnancy	46 (20)	24	14
Relationship breakdown / difficulties	39 (17)	20	12
No concerns	36 (16)	12	20
Sexual inadequacies	24 (10)	8	14
Sexual boredom	15 (7)	7	6

Patterns of pleasure and risk

The gendered construction of sexual pleasure and sexual risk taking has been well documented and young women have been shown to lack access to a language for talking about pleasure and a sense of entitlement and moral legitimacy for acquiring this kind of knowledge (Fine 1988, Holland et al 1998. See chapter three). Analyses of participants' hopes and concerns for the future point to gendered patterns of change and continuity (see chapter one). There is evidence that women are imagining and looking forward to their own sexual futures, as much or more than young men, and that young men are looking forward to being in lasting relationships and having children as much as young women. These desires and pleasures do not appear to carry the same perceived level of risk for young men as they do for young women given evidence that the threat of unwanted pregnancy and relationship breakdown preoccupies young women more than young men.

The survey data suggest that the majority of young women who participated in the survey are engaging with questions of sexual pleasure and an interest in topics such as how to enjoy or improve sexual experience, how to have an orgasm, what sensations to expect from sexual experience and how to pleasure their sexual partners. Analysis of the data on participants' 'questions' suggests however that a higher proportion of young men's questions related to sexual pleasure compared with young women's (72%/50%) and a lower proportion related to risk (16%/25%). This suggests that, whilst young women and young men are both able to engage with, and articulate, languages of erotics and desire, there are continuing patterns of gender difference relating to sexual pleasure and sexual risk.

The survey also provides evidence that young people's concerns about the future may be shifting as their relationship situation changes, they get older and their level of sexual experience changes. For example, participants aged 16-17 are more worried about getting an STI than those aged 20 and over (37%/23%) but much less worried than their older counterparts about *'disloyalty'*, *'uncommitted relationships'* or *'not being able to find a partner.'* Analyses of the data suggest that young people who are in a relationship are more concerned about pregnancy and less concerned about getting an STI. They are also more likely to have no concerns and to be looking forward to discovering more about sex in the future, but they are also more likely to worry about *'getting bored'* or *'it going down hill'*. These analyses suggest that young people's desires and fears for the future are shifting, shaped not just by their gender position but by their shifting sex and relationship experiences.

One of the arguments set out in the literature calling for the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health work with young people is that educators need to challenge popular ideas that sexual pleasure and safer sexual practices are incompatible. The survey data suggest that, for the majority of participants, 'health' related concerns about contraception, pregnancy and STIs are not key factors in characterizing sexual experiences as 'good' or 'bad'. Participants' 'messages' to their future children suggest that they value safe sex messages as pedagogical tools for children and the concerns they express for their own future sex and relationship experiences suggest that they are both well aware of, and concerned about, the potential risks of engaging in sexual activity. There is limited evidence however that these fears and values inform participants' understandings of good and bad sex. Safety and contraception were largely absent from participants' definitions of

good and bad sex; only 5 participants (2% of valid responses) referred to the absence of contraception or protection in their definition of bad sex with statements such as Bad sex is - *'not being able to use a condom'* (16), *'rough, senseless, unprotected'* (243) and 13 participants (5% of valid responses) referred to contraception, protection or safety in their definitions of 'good sex' with phrases such as, good sex is *'with a condom'* (30), or *safe and very very fun'* (264). For young women, key 'safety' concerns when characterising bad sex seem to relate to forced or pressured sex and for male and female participants to the risks of boredom, relationship breakdown and possible infidelity.

The survey data support the argument that sexual health and education work with young people should adopt a holistic approach to sexuality that incorporates broad understandings of the emotional and physical risks and pleasures of sexual relationships, for example the risk of being 'cheated on' or a supposed committed relationship turning out to be causal, the desire for and pleasure in intimate couple relationships, the desire to experiment sexually and learn more about having sex and the risks of not being able to 'last', of getting bored, of unwanted pregnancy and of catching an STI.

Conclusion: Summaries and implications for practice

This chapter presents analysis of the survey data with a focus on the resources that participants identify as important in developing understandings of sex and on patterns of diversity and difference in participants' understandings of 'good' and 'bad' sex, and the pleasures and risks of sexual experience.

Analyses of these data suggest that participants' gender can explain some patterns in understandings of 'good sex', such as those relating to love, fun and coercion, but that variables such as sexual experience and relationship status are more useful for explaining patterns of meaning and value in relation to reciprocity, boredom and sexual experimentation. In analysis of the interview data I pursue this line of enquiry further, exploring how young people's sex and relationship situation or status shapes how they understand and talk about 'good sex'.

Table 17: Summary of most frequent themes in participants' responses

Good sex	Bad sex	Future desires	Future fears	Questions	Messages
Love Mutuality Enjoyment Intimacy Fun	Pressure No emotion No enjoyment Wrong partner / relationship	Sexual experimentation learning & competence. Lasting Relationships Enjoyable sex Having children	STIs Pregnancy Relationship breakdown & infidelity No worries.	Pleasure - orgasm, lasting, Risk – pregnancy, contraception, STIs Relationship challenges & cheating	Safe sex – use contraception Delay – wait, don't rush, be ready Sex positive – value & respect sex, enjoy yourself.

Table 18: Summary of most frequent resources and practices

Key *influences* on views about sex and relationships	Key resources and practices for *understanding* sex and relationships
Media Friends Personal experience Pornography Family members	Look on the internet Talk to a friend Go to a clinic / GP Use own experiences Read a book / leaflet

The survey data suggest that young people are able to articulate a range of meanings, questions and concerns relating to both the pleasures and risks of sexual experience and relationships. Participants' 'pleasure' questions for example provide insight into participants' expectations about what counts as 'good sex' - female orgasm during penetrative sex, for example – whilst also highlighting

particular aspects of sexual experience that participants posit as being problematic, concerning or confusing. These key points of desire and contention include female orgasm, achieved (quickly) during penetration, long lasting and frequent sex, a continually improving and pleasurable sex life, the desire (and concern with how) to pleasure your partner and the expected pleasure and pain of first sex.

Evidence that this sample of young people are able to articulate a range of topics and dilemmas relating to sexual pleasure and desire suggest there is scope for engaging young people in further research or education work on similar or related topics. In focus groups I have used quotes from the survey data relating to 'good sex' and participants' 'pleasure questions' to provoke in-depth discussion of many of the dilemmas and debates referred to in this chapter. I would suggest that the survey data could be used this way, as a resource or to shape the content of resources designed to engage young people in further work in this area.

The data on participants' messages to their future children serve as a reminder of the potential limitations to this work and the ways in which opportunities for exploring the potential gains and pleasures of sexual experimentation can become closed down when questions of sexuality are framed around the figure of a child (Alldred and David 2007). This finding was repeated in focus group discussions as participants engaged enthusiastically in conversations about 'good sex' during the focus group but   and might encourage them to 'go and do it'. In the final chapter of this thesis I return to this dilemma and explore the kinds of contexts in which pleasure work might be possible.

Chapter five: The focus groups

In this chapter I present an analysis of the focus group data generated during the second stage of the research. As previously documented, this stage involved meeting with four distinct groups of young people and asking them to address the question – 'What is good sex?' – using a set of quotation cards as discussion prompts (see chapter three). The aim of this stage of the research was to explore how young people talk about 'good sex' in group settings and spaces and to use a reflexive, situated analysis of these group encounters to consider (1) what can we learn about young people's sexual cultures from this method and (2) what we can learn from these analyses about the potential of the 'group space' as a research and practice setting for engaging young people in work around 'sexual pleasure'?

In chapter two I outlined a set of debates advocating the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health and education work with young people, which focus largely on the benefits of including a discourse of desire /erotics / pleasure in group and classroom settings (Fine 1998, Allen 2004, Ingham 2005). This second stage of the research aims to contribute to these debates and unsettle some of the assumptions about what might constitute a 'discourse of desire' or 'erotics' in group interactions with young people. What happens when you put together a group of young people and ask them to talk with each other, and with a researcher and/or practitioner, about 'good sex' and sexual pleasure? What would be the challenges and benefits of doing this for young people, for researchers and for practitioners?

In chapter three I provided an overview of the theoretically informed, but practically muddled, sampling procedures that resulted in the four focus groups conducted during stage two of the research. The first of these was a 'researcher convened' group (Barbour 2009: 66-7) of 'sexually experienced' young people, which two young people attended; an 18 year old young man with an experience 'rating' of 8/10 and a 19 year old young women with a medium level (5/10) of sexual experience (See chapter three). The second was the 'sexually *in*experienced' group, which consisted of three young people who had never had sex and one young woman who had been sexually active in the past and indicated that she had a 'medium' (6/10) level of sexual experience. The other two groups were a 'pre-existing' group of heterosexual young men who had been meeting weekly with a youth worker and sexual health outreach worker at their local youth centre and a 'researcher-convened' group of three young, bisexual women. Details of all participants are provided in Appendix K.

In this chapter I provide a reflective account of each focus group and an analysis of the themes that emerged from each encounter. I present these as four examples of what it is possible to say publically about sexual pleasure and argue that these examples of 'public' discourse must be accounted for in the context of the four unique 'situated interactions' from which they emerged. The data extracts and analyses presented in this chapter have been chosen to reflect the dominant themes that emerged within each encounter and to foreground the 'patterns of affect' (Wetherell 2012) that were at play in mobilising these themes and the 'sex-gender displays' (Nayak and Kehily 2008) in which they were embedded. Reporting on the method in this way I offer a dramaturgical staging of persistent themes that emerged in the data, interrogating these four 'sites of performance' (Brannen and Pattman 2005) as a way of commenting on where and how pleasure

is embedded, marginalised, mediated and gendered in young people's sexual cultures.

Focus group 1: The 'sexually experienced group'

'As a man, you wanna be on point!' (Wallay[16], Focus group one)

The first focus group I organised was the' sexually experienced group' to which 23 young people with 'high' levels of sexual experience were invited and to which two young people with different levels of sexual experience turned up. The 'sexually experienced focus group' therefore emerged as a duologue (that I encouraged and mediated and that my assistant facilitator silently witnessed) between two young people with very different sexual biographies, gender positions and styles communicating their 'sexual story' (Plummer 1995).

This group simultaneously sets up and critiques a highly gendered account of 'good sex', which I suggest is driven by Wallay's desire to tell his 'haunted' sexual story of failed masculine sexual performance and his quest for female sexual agency. In quiet parallel, Vinnie tells her own sexual story of 'rushing', 'regret', and finding the 'right person'. Both accounts draw heavily on concepts of time to create a framework within which rushed, quick and short sex come to stand for the sexual (and gender) failure. This group narrative provides two sometimes contradictory accounts of 'good sex' that are contingent on relationship context: the successful performance of timely gendered sexual norms within the context of casual sexual relationships and mutual exploring and negotiation of pleasure over time within the context of a long-term relationship.

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[16] All names are pseudonyms selected by participants.

Wallay dominated the discussion, talking confidently and at length about his personal sexual experiences, exclusively within casual (hetero)sexual encounters. Vinnie was quieter, commenting and laughing at Wallay's lively accounts, occasionally disagreeing and offering her own opinions, but with limited reference to her own personal experiences. After the discussion had ended and the recorder had been switched off Vinnie mentioned that she was in a four year relationship with the father of her young son. Vinnie did not refer to this relationship or to her sexual experiences with her partner during the focus group but her accounts of 'good sex' reflect this relationship context, often in contrast to Wallay's descriptions of casual sexual encounters. This was evident from the very start of the discussion when Vinnie selected and disagreed with the statement - *'Good sex is when it's all new and you are getting to know their body'*.

> **Vinnie**: Yeah, cos if you have been with someone for long, then yeah obviously it's going to be better cos you know each other and you know each others body but then like this, if you have only been with each other, like you just first time, you're not gonna, I don't know, that's what I think anyway.
> **Ester**: Yeah, yeah.
> **Wallay**: I don't know, uh saying that yeah, I think for me as a boy, first time is always, yeah, it's always there. Cos obviously you wanna pr-, as a man, you wanna prove, - not prove, but you know you. You wanna be, on point. (*Vinnie laughs, Wallay laughs*).
> **Wallay**: Cos you don't want a girl to be going 'aaahhh, the first time I had it with that boy it was not', you know? (*Vinnie laughs*) You, you do your thing and I think after a long while, cos the girl now knows that you can do your thing (*Wallay laughs*) you probably just do it and then you're done. (*Vinnie and Wallay laugh*).

In this brief extract Vinnie and Wallay summarise two accounts of how to experience 'good sex' - through getting to know a person and their sexual body in

the context of an ongoing relationship and through the successful performance of masculinity within a particular sexual encounter. In this extract and elsewhere in the data, Vinnie's account of 'good sex' is gender neutral, evoking an impersonal genderless 'you' who gradually learns how to negotiate and reciprocate embodied sexual pleasure within the context of a long-term relationship. In contrast, Wallay offers an explicitly gendered account of 'good sex' that switches throughout the group between descriptions of his personal, and largely unsatisfying, sexual experiences and a generalised account of masculine sexual performance. As in the above extract, the personal story of 'me' becomes almost indistinguishable from the collective 'boy' and 'man' who seems to represent a model of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1987) that Wallay both reifies and attempts to move away from throughout the group discussion.

Any tensions between Wallay and Vinnie in terms of their conflicting opinions and different sexual biographies, gender positions and cultural heritages[17] were mediated throughout the focus group discussion through humour that often served to recognise shared cultural references, meanings and colloquial terms. In the above extract, for example, Vinnie's laughter seems to acknowledge familiarity with the figure of the girl who ridicules her male partner for his poor sexual performance and with Wallay's use of the term 'on point' to describe the pressure on young men to perform sexually the first time they have sex with a new partner. Since Wallay dominated the group discussion, Vinnie's account of negotiating pleasure in the context of a committed relationship was largely silenced in this setting and it was in the interview that I conducted with her a few months later that she was able to discuss her account of how her understanding and experiences of

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[17] Vinnie is Black Caribbean and Wallay Black African. Both engage in banter about the sexual practices of 'Jamaicans' and 'Africans' during the discussion and display familiarity with both cultures.

'good sex' had developed over time, contingent on the success of her relationship with her partner.

The male sexual performer and female sexual evaluator

Based on their analysis of the reality TV show *The Sex Inspectors* Laura Harvey and Ros Gill argue that contemporary mediations of sex and relationships are increasingly framed through 'neoliberal discourses of self-improvement and entrepreneurialism' that call on both men and women to be enterprising sexual subjects, but in highly gender differentiated ways (Harvey and Gill 2011b). Whilst men are urged to learn the 'science' of 'efficient', 'turbo charged' sex and improve their sexual performance and 'lasting' power, women are called upon to become 'sexual entrepreneurs' who are always 'up for it' and actively engaged in 'spicing up' sexual encounters to keep their men happy and turned on (Harvey and Gill 2011a, 2011b, Tyler 2004). As Ros Gill has argued elsewhere (2007, 2008) women's value in the contemporary 'sexualised' heteronormative economy comes not from their innocence or virtue, but from their 'technologies of sexiness' (Radner 1993) and their ability to present themselves as 'appropriately' desiring and desirable (See chapter two).

In focus group one the figure of the 'turbo charged' male emerges as a precarious ideal that is closely monitored by female partners and by male and female peers. Both Vinnie and Wallay agree that young men have to 'prove' that they can 'last' so as to avoid being ridiculed by their female sexual partner and her friends. As Vinnie states, '*they have to prove a point, if they don't then they'll just get cussed...by the girl. Obviously the girl will be like, small willy, or two minutes or something to their friends.*' Young women feature in these accounts as evaluators

of the male sexual performance, invested not in 'keeping their men happy' (Harvey and Gill 2011b) but on ensuring that he performs successfully and is able to meet their sexual needs and demands. Although young women may also have to *prove* themselves, *'like to make yourself better so that he doesn't go off and find someone else'* (Vinnie) – this is a private performance judged by their sexual partners that lacks the potential for public gender failure.

Wallay is critical of this gendered evaluation of the successful sexual performance, expressing irritation that his peers offer a commentary on what the boy 'was doing', with no evaluation of what the girl has done – 'unless she's done something extreme!'. When I ask if it makes a difference therefore 'what the girl does', Wallay responds by imagining a scenario in which the roles are reversed and the girl is the sexual performer and he is the male evaluator of 'good sex'.

Ester: So does it makes a difference what the girl does?
Wallay: Yeah, yeah it does, at the end of the day, it does.
Vinnie: Yeah, obviously boys like girls that's good in bed.
Ester: And what makes a girl 'good in bed'?
Wallay: She just gotta act like a porn star (*laughs*)
Vinnie and Wallay laugh
Wallay: (*laughing*) And then we, as boys, will say she's good.
Ester: And what does that mean, what does that mean, 'to act like a porn star'?
Wallay: Nah, you know what yeah, first when I went into relationships with girls, I always wanted the good girls, you see? The quiet girls, you see? But then I realised they are frigid, so once you get in bed, they don't know what they're doing, no I mean what they do is. I'm doing everything, it's like I'm initiating what to do next, like, no, I don't like that, I mean I want her to be knowing what's happening, you know? What's happening, what's going on? I want her to be doing certain things, obviously to get me, cos girls think yeah that once me, I'm aroused then, once I have a reaction its over innit,

yeah I mean, yeah that's a boy innit, I want yeah, for us to have good sex, I want you to interact, its not just me, doing stuff to you, you got, you got to give it back. Girls are greedy, you know what I mean?

Vinnie: Not all girls.

Wallay: Girls are greedy (*laughing*)

Vinnie: Not all girls!

Wallay: I just wanna be there, its just gotta be there and I'm like you man, that boring, (*Vinnie laughs*) that what so its dead, see one thing I'm realising nowadays is, when boys talk about who I slept with yeah, or if he was in a relationship, and he's talking about 'ah that girl, ah that girl, was she good?' Good. And then I'll try and get in cos I heard she was good. Cos now we end up going for the girls that sleeps are-if you mean, like the boys, the girls that sleep around, if you get what I mean, like the whores innit?

Vinnie: Mmmm

In this account Wallay expresses a desire for a female sexual partner who is sexually experienced, knows '*what's happening*' and who can '*initiate*', '*interact*', and do '*certain things*' to get him aroused. The figure who emerges from this account is the female sexual entrepreneur (Harvey and Gill 2011a) who has acquired the appropriate 'technologies of sexiness' (Gill 2007, 2008) to enable her to take equal responsibility for 'spicing up' a sexual encounter and ensuring that both partners '*have good sex*'.

Wallay's account distinguishes between '*good*' '*normal*' '*quiet*' girls who he found to be '*frigid*', '*boring*' and '*dead*' in bed, and '*the whores*', the girls who '*sleep around*' and who have the skills and experience required to be the proactive sexual performers and entrepreneurs that he desires. The contradictory moral values surrounding female sexual experience have been well documented by scholars of 'post-feminist culture' who have highlighted the dilemmas that young women face in trying to become the 'sexual entrepreneur' and display their

'technologies of sexiness' in a heterosexual market place that is 'overlaid with tenacious notions of good girls and bad girls' (Gill 2007: 73, McRobbie 2007).

Both Vinnie and Wallay acknowledge that putting this coveted female sexual role into practice is difficult. Vinnie states that some of her friends come to her for *'tips'* because they are *'don't know what to do or cos they can't be bothered'* or because they are *'shy cos if they try something it might not be right and then the boy will just probably just be like - move.'* Wallay adds that some girls have religious concerns about sex before marriage— *'is it morally right?'* or that they are unable to relax and enjoy sex because *'they are doing it because of peer pressure',* rather than because of their own desire of *'initiative'.* In Wallay's account the focus is however on the dilemmas faced by young men in negotiating this contradictory heterosexual market place and in expressing frustration with the good girl/bad girl binary that his account both reproduces and identifies as a barrier to having the kind of good, interactive sex he desires.

Wallay's account also plays with the image of the *'greedy girl'* who is suggestive of a passive aggressive female sexuality that slips out of the good girl/bad girl binary. Unlike the *'frigid'* good girls, the *'greedy girl'* is desiring and consumes the fruits of her partner's labour whilst failing to *'give it back'* like the sexually experienced *'whores'.* This is the haunting threat of the unsatisfied girl, unfulfilled by her partner's sexual performance and unfulfilling due to her inability to perform her *'porn star'* role in the shared labour of 'good sex'.

Getting the (gendered) timing right

Towards the end of the group discussion Wallay tells a story about an early sexual experience in which his *'two minute'* sexual performance is evaluated and

publically shamed by his female sexual partner. Like his use of balletic metaphor 'on point', this story highlights the extraordinary labour and instability of the male sexual performance that is open to public evaluation and potential ridicule from female partners and peers.

> I done it with a girl, she was older than me, but it was like, 'is that all?' are you actually being serious' and I was like 'yeah' (*laughs*) yeah, she went like she was going to slap me, and yeah she stood up and just left straight up, told all her friends (*Vinnie laughs*) and told all my friends but it was like, cos me, I, I didn't care I was like, my two minutes, just two minutes in bed does not determine what I do outside, it does not determine if I'm a bad boyfriend, if I'm a good boyfriend. Does not determine if I am a bad person if I don't have a future. That was just two minutes, I'm just 15 years old, I just started. What is that? But it just, it haunts you for quite a long time you know? (*Laughing*) it haunts you (*Vinnie laughs*) them two minutes. Them two minutes haunt you!

In this story, Wallay presents his sexual partner as in possession of the 'porn star' sexual confidence and experience that he suggests are essential for a girl to be 'good in bed'. In the context of this early sexual encounter and failed masculine performance however these 'technologies of sexiness' are a 'greedy' nightmare, rather than desirable ingredients for 'good sex. The young woman in this story is unsympathetic to Wallay's lack of sexual experience and inability to 'last' and is concerned not with Wallay's value as 'person' or 'boyfriend', but with her own (lack of) sexual satisfaction. This is a dilemma that Wallay suggests is specific to casual relationships, arguing elsewhere in the discussion that if there are 'feelings' or 'love' between sexual partners you know that 'regardless of you doing it for five minutes, or ten minutes or twenty minutes, she's not going to mind, there's feelings there'. In the casual sexual encounter time becomes fragmented and the two minute sexual encounter appears as disjointed from both partners' futures and

pasts. This is the brief, anonymous 'zipless fuck' (Jong 1974) appearing in this boy's biography as a haunting nightmare rather than a 'platonic ideal'. There is no opportunity for the 15 year old boy in this story to demonstrate his sexual skills or personal worth *'outside'* of the context of this brief sexual encounter and his *'two minutes'* become the only basis for assessing what kind of sexual performer, partner and person he is.

These tensions between the new, the familiar and the 'timely' (Thomson 2000a) play out in each focus group and across all three data sets as a key 'contested area' in the 'imaginary line' between 'good' and 'bad' sex (Rubin 1984). In focus group one the language of time enables both participants to account for their own perceived sexual (and gender) failures. Wallay's repetitive talk of *'minutes'* offers a fragmented account of sexual experience and the fragility of the male sexual body; an account that Wallay suggests is both pervasive and limited in making sense of what counts as 'good' and 'bad' sex, or what counts as a 'good' or 'bad' person. For Vinnie, the language of bad timing also enables talk about her own perceived failure, which is configured not as the failure of her sexual body or performance but of her inability adhere to the appropriate timeline of romance and female respectability (Thomson 2000a, Skeggs 1997).

> **Vinnie:** I wished I'd waited…for the right person.
> *(pause)*
> **Wallay:** Ah that's cute.
> *Vinnie, Wallay and Ester laugh*
> **Ester:** And what does that mean, the right person?
> **Vinnie:** I don't know, just, someone that…
> **Ester:** Someone that?
> **Vinnie:** You wanted, like you wanna do it with, I can't explain it. Someone that you like, like, love near enough.

Ester: Mmm someone that you care about...yeah.

Vinnie: That you have been with for a long time.

Vinnie's regret for her first sexual experience is articulated as her failure to wait – for the right person, someone she *'loved near enough'* and had been with *'for a long time'*. Wallay's comment that this is 'cute' and our subsequent laughter seems to acknowledge the idealism in Vinnie's account of "Mr Right".

Both Vinnie and Wallay express disappointment that their first sexual experience was *'rushed'* but whereas for Vinnie this signifies having sex *'too soon'* within a relationship and within her life-course, for Wallay it signifies that the sexual encounter itself was too *'rushed'* as he claims that *'it would have been better if the first time I had sex, I had it in my own comfort, as in it was not rushed, as in yeah, I had my time'* (Wallay). Vinnie and Wallay's accounts point towards a gendered moral landscape of timelessness and self respect (Thomson 2000a) within which 'not rushing' is differentially valued within male and female biographies. Their accounts also point towards the complexity of good sexual timing that depends on both partners having sex at the right time in their individual (gendered) biographies, at the right moment within a particular relationship and at a stage in their sexual careers when both partners have equitable levels of sexual experience and skills.

In all four focus groups participants suggest that the language of love and romance *'cant explain'* the difference between 'good' and 'bad', regrettable and enjoyable sex. It was rather temporal languages of *'rushing'* and *'taking your time'* that were more frequently deployed to preserve the special status of sex and to map out a timely path through this ambiguous moral terrain. In my discussion

below I explore how these languages are used, not to account for perceived past personal gender and sexual failures as they were in focus group one, but to construct timely sexual futures and emphasise the value of *'taking your time'.*

Focus group 2: The 'sexually inexperienced group'

> If you rush into something it's never going to be as good as if you take your
> time (Jessica, focus group two)

As documented in the introduction to this thesis, my experiences during the exploratory and pilot stage of the research raised questions about whether it would be possible to engage young people who had not had sex in group discussions about sexual pleasure. One of the aims of convening a 'sexually *in*experienced group' was to create a 'safe space' (Fine 1988) within which young people who had not had sex might feel able to talk about pleasure and to explore what 'counts' as 'good sex' within this particular context. The group that emerged from the somewhat messy sampling procedures described in chapter three consisted of four young people, three had never had sex (Jessica, Michael and Danielle) and one (Jasmine) who had been sexually active in the past and indicated on the questionnaire that she had a 'medium' level of sexual experience.

All four young people in this group confidently provided their opinions about sex and pleasure, commenting and disagreeing with each other and with the statements provided on the cards. In this sexually *in*experienced group the participants (other than Jasmine) were not able to tell funny or haunted personal sexual stories to establish their authority, build their arguments or perform their gender identities, as participants do to varying degrees in the other focus group

encounters. This is rather a staging for telling other people's sexual stories and allowing commentary on popular media and peer group cultures. The discussion oscillates around four case studies that Jessica and Jasmine provide based on their friends' sexual experiences and the character of Samantha from the television series *Sex in the City*. Commentary on these cases gives rise to warning figures and ideal characters - the embarrassed girl, the needy girl, the bullied girl and the empowered woman. Whilst this commentary enables the participants to uphold the value of good, timely, comfortable sex and mutual (hetero)sexual pleasure the discursive- affective patterns (Wetherell 2012) of discomfort and unease in this group suggest that this is contested terrain.

Feeling comfortable and taking your time

The focus group started with Danielle selecting a card containing the statement 'Pleasing her, pleases me' and a subsequent group affirmation of the importance of mutual pleasure in (assumed heterosexual) relationships. All four participants agreed that sexual pleasure can involve *'just a physical thing'* but that *'there's another level when you bring emotion in'* (Jasmine). In their discussion the participants suggested that the key ingredient for physically and emotionally pleasurable sex is feeling *'comfortable'* with yourself, your body and your partner. As Jessica argues, *'for you to be physically relaxed you need to be ok in your mind, you need to be comfortable with the person that you're with.'* Jessica in particular emphasises that these feelings of comfort with yourself and your partner are only possible over time, through not rushing into sex early in a relationship and through waiting until *'you are older, you know yourself more, so you feel more confident to say, this is my body, this is what I want'* (Jessica).

To exemplify her argument Jessica tells the story of a school friend who started having sex with her boyfriend *'quite early'* when *'they didn't know each other for long.'* Jessica states that she knew that her friend wasn't comfortable with the boyfriend because she was *'too embarrassed to eat in front of him'*, which led Jessica to reflect that the sex *'can't be that great because you are not fully comfortable with the person'*. Jessica contrasts this experience with her friend's subsequent relationship with a boy who she started having sex eight months into the relationship. Jessica states that in this relationship her friend was much more comfortable and *'spoke a lot more about their relationship'*.

In Jessica's story the boundary between timely and untimely sex becomes intelligible through bodily practices and emotional experience - being able to eat in front of a partner and feeling comfortable in his company. Told in this context, the story functions to emphasise the value of delaying sexual activity and to demonstrate the risks to young women of *'rushing'* into sex in new relationships. Danielle appears particularly concerned by Jessica's story and suggests that the girl's embarrassment could have easily led to *'an abusive relationship'*.

> [When] you're embarrassed, you can't do certain things, you might be easily criticised...easily be offended, and not be able to um kind of stand up for yourself.

In this way feeling comfortable and confident not only enables physically and emotional pleasurable sex, it mitigates against pressured and potentially harmful sexual experiences. This account of comfortable, timely sex mirrors youth sexual health discourses that advocate the value of 'making your own decisions', waiting until you are 'ready' and 'saying no' to pressure from partners and peers (NHS 2011, Spencer et al 2008). It is an account referenced in each group, not to

describe experiences of 'good sex' but to try to explain, as Vinnie struggles to do in the example given above, uneasy feelings of regret and disappointment in having failed to wait for the intangible *'right'* time and *'right'* person.

In focus group two this tension between the messy realities of sexual experience and the rational ideals of good, timely sex emerge only occasionally when Jasmine attempts to challenge Jessica's well-reasoned arguments through providing hesitant accounts of her personal sexual experiences, as this following commentary suggests.

> **Jessica:** If you're not comfortable you won't say [what you don't like], you'll just keep it quiet and just do what the other person wants even if you don't like it, and that won't make it good and pleasurable for you if you are doing something that you don't like.
> **Ester:** And how easy is that to say 'can you change that please'?
> **Jasmine:** Um, I don't know, I've never really said that to be honest (*laughs*). Um, nah I might of shown them maybe rather than actually, cos I think maybe,...yeah, ...thank-...thankfully I haven't been in a position where I have had to really say that. I think, maybe once, but um... I have usually just shown them or whatever.

Jasmine's embodied account of negotiating pleasure complicates the account given by Jessica that outlines a direct relationship between comfort with yourself, communication with your partner and the experience of 'good sex'. Jasmine asserts the sexual body into the discussion – not as knowable, boundaried and a place to speak from, but as part of the messy negotiations of pleasure and communication in sexual relationships. This account of embodied negotiations of pleasure is echoed by other young women in the study who detail the ways in which they would *'show'* and *'guide'* their male partners, rather than risk upsetting or offending him by telling him that the sex is *'bad'*. Jasmine's admission that she

has never asked a partner to 'change' his sexual practices is accompanied by a laugh that seems to mock the idealised nature of this account whilst also acknowledging her deviance from this ideal.

Casual sex for pleasure: why would a girl do that?

Within each focus group 'patterns of affects' (Wetherell 2012) function to map moral boundaries around what counts as 'good' and 'bad' sex. In each group these patterns of affect became particularly intense when the discussion shifts to talking about the pursuit of female sexual pleasure in casual sexual relationships. Whereas in focus group three the dominant pattern of affect is disgust (see below) in focus group two the pattern is one of discomfort, confusion and concern. In focus group two the participants explore this contested territory through commentary on Jasmine's story about a friend who has recently separated from a 'serious relationship' and has decided to 'have casual sex' through a website that is 'just focused on that'.

> **Jasmine:** I was a bit worried about her. I still am a bit, but she seems to be fine and says that this is what she wants to do. Um 'I just don't want to get into anything serious, I just want to have sex because I like sex.' I mean I don't particularly agree with that, that's just my personal, like if I got out of a relationship I wouldn't really want to go round sleeping with loads of men but um I've noticed that a few of my friends do that and it does make me question it, like why would a girl do that?....
> **Ester:** What is it about that, that makes you feel -
> **Jasmine:** Uncomfortable.
> **Ester:** Uncomfortable?
> **Jasmine:** Um...I don't know ...I ....for me, I think, having sex with someone...is something more than that and ideally I would want to sort of have that with someone I care about. That's just my view, um I think it's, I think it can be a bit um...what do you call it? Uh, not degrading...um...I think

it takes something away from you, like if you are just sort of-

(*Jessica nods in agreement*)

Danielle: Like meaning

Jasmine: Something like um...maybe a bit of self respect. I don't know.

Ester: Because there are lots of partners or because you don't care about those partners?

Jasmine: Um....because you feel the need. That you need to sleep around with lots of men. I think there's like an underlying issue there behind that, I don't know.

In this group context, pleasure is not easily accepted as a motivation for a young woman to have sex with someone she does not know and has only just met, leading to the key question in this commentary - *'why would a girl do that?'*. Despite Jasmine's friend's expressed motivation for having sex in casual relationships – *'I just want to have sex because I like sex'* - Jasmine reads her friend's desire as *'the need...to sleep around with lots of men'* which she further reads as an indication that her friend has *'an underlying issue'*. This neediness places Jasmine's friend in a precarious position; she stands to have something taken away from her, to lose her self-respect and to come close to moral degradation.

When I ask Michael to comment on the discussion of gender and casual sex he is resolute in his view of gender equality.

> What I say is because a woman and a man in today's society are equal to each other I think there is no difference if a man is sleeping with many girls or if a woman is sleeping with many mans (*sic*) I think is the same thing. If someone is desperately need (*sic*) sex then I can understand why they are doing it, but if they are just doing it because they can, then they are not responsible.

For Michael the desperate *'need'* for sex that unsettled Jasmine is an understandable and acceptable motivation for both men and women to have sex. Although the three young women in the group agree with Michael in principle they suggest that *'in reality'* it is not *'really like that'*. To exemplify this argument Jessica provides a story of a friend who was sexually *'promiscuous'* and as a consequence was *'bullied'*, *'not respected by the boys or the girls'* and *'quite a bit known around the area to be that kind of person'*. Jessica uses this story to evidence the sexual double standard, contrasting this girl's experiences with a male friend of hers whose open sexual promiscuity is seen by her peers as acceptable, natural and amusing. In their commentary on this story the young women suggest that the double standard is unfair, but that since male promiscuity is more *'common'* it is therefore *'justified'* and *'make(s) a bit more sense'*. This is contested territory for the participants in focus group two however as they struggle to find a language for talking about their objections to the sexual behaviours of their female friends and peers and their varying levels of comfort and unease when considering the pursuit of male and female pleasure in casual sexual relationships.

At the end of an extended and uneasy discussion about young women having sex in casual (hetero)sexual relationships, Jessica evokes the character of Samantha from the television series *Sex in the City* to provide a counter story of female sexual experience, promiscuity and pleasure. In contrast to the needy, bullied, raped and embarrassed girls that the group have been discussing, Jessica argues that Samantha is a *'good role model for women because she thinks about herself as well, rather than just what her partners want.* When I query the difference between Samantha's promiscuous pursuit of pleasure and the *'bullied'* friend Jessica has just been discussing, Jessica marks out their difference in terms of their levels of self-confidence and their motivations for having sex.

My friend she wasn't confident. She wasn't doing it because she enjoyed it and because she was quite confident and she was happy with it. She was doing it because um he felt like she had some trauma when she was raped, and she just, I don't know what her reasons were, I don't really understand it but she wasn't happy about it either. Whereas I think Samantha I think her character seems quite happy with what she is doing but I know that that girl wasn't happy. So I think that's the difference. And I think like, I don't know, I think we view it differently cos, like I see her and I know that she's doing it because she has low self esteem, whereas with a confident character you wouldn't think that so you view them differently straight away. You think, ok they're quite happy with themselves so its alright for them to be doing it, whereas someone who is quite vulnerable you would think like oh you shouldn't be doing it.

Jessica's account suggests that we are able *to 'view'* Samantha's *'promiscuity'* differently because Samantha, unlike the other female figures evoked in the discussion, is able to embody and display her self-confidence and sexual satisfaction. This suggests that in focus group two it is not the pursuit of pleasure in casual sexual relationships that is problematic, but rather a woman's inability to display the level of confidence and contentment required to distinguish her from the shamed, bullied, and vulnerable figures who are the subjects of the participants' stories. As Laura Harvey and Ros Gill suggest, for women 'great sex' involves not just participating in particular sexual practices or acts but performing 'the experience of enjoyment of such acts' (Harvey and Gill 2011b, Gill 2008).

In their intergenerational study of young Norwegian women, Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen and Monica Rudberg (2007) map the changing cultural framing of young female heterosexual desire over the last three generations and the ways in which class has marked out differentiated positioning of sexual possibility and risk. They

suggest that the figure of the sexualised working class 'cheap' girl no longer has the same resonance for contemporary young women as it did for their mothers and grandmothers, and has been replaced by the figure of the 'used' or 'exposed' girl. This is the girl who, in contrast to the ideal contemporary young woman who is liberated, self-assured and independent, 'cannot handle the pressure, who is not autonomous enough, and who cannot master the demands of self-construction' (Bjerrum Nielson and Rudberg 2007: 111). Whilst this new construction of the 'exposed' or 'used' girl is more empathetic than the 'cheap' girl, it is still connected with 'the kind of shame that is attached to a girl who is not autonomous enough to place boundaries around herself and make her choices out of her desire (*ibid.*). Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg draw on Skegg's concept of 'excess done with constraint (because they are self-governing, rather than beyond governance)' (Skeggs 2004: 105) to elaborate on this distinction and to suggest that contemporary young women are able to pursue their sexual desires with a freedom denied to previous generations, *as long as* they possess the required autonomy and self-governance.

In her work Skeggs has argued that the classed boundaries of respectability mean that sexual agency is valued differently when read on to middle class and working class, male and female, black and white bodies (1997, 2004, 2005). In relation to the television series *Sex in the City* she suggests that the central female characters such as Samantha accrue cultural and economic capital through their professionalism and consumption practices which means that they can offset sexual pathology and pursue sexual pleasure and freedom without being read as the shameful, grotesque figures of the white, working class 'Essex girls' (Skeggs 2005).

In focus group two the participants and I are silent about the way in which age, race and social class can shape moral frameworks around sexuality and pleasure. Although it is clear that the girls in Jessica and Jasmine's stories are young and female, we are unsure of their class or racial background. What is clear is that the girls who populate these stories lack the kind of respectability that can be accrued through age, professionalism and the consumption of 'Manolo Blahnik shoes' and are rather figured through the classed and gendered tropes of the 'used' girl (Skeggs 2005, 2004, Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 2007). This is not the disgusting figure of the *slag'* who emerges in focus group three, but the concerning figure of the vulnerable girl – the 'Ophelia' who lacks autonomy and confidence and is at risk of losing a sense of her authentic self (Aapola et al 2005).

Focus group 3: The 'pre-existing group'

'Ester will never come back again!' (Focus group 3 participant).

My analysis of group three focuses on the participants' use of story telling and humour for mobilising a group performance of masculinity, desire and disgust (Brannen and Pattman 2005). This group was conducted with six young men who had been meeting weekly at their local youth centre to take part in a series of sex education sessions with a local youth worker (Steven) and an outreach sexual health worker (Graham), who participated in the discussion. The young men were all aged 17-21 and formed part of a peer group that lived or worked on a nearby estate. The youth worker Steven had known many of the boys for over five years and informed me that none of them were working legally and all had been unable to sustain any period of employment or training since leaving school. This 'pre-existing' group was therefore very different from the other focus groups that I

conducted, all the participants knew each other and had established relationship hierarchies and norms that existed beyond the boundaries of the research encounter, rooted in local places and practices (See chapter three).

Throughout the focus group the young men used jokes, banter, vivid storytelling and the playful use of metaphor to construct an account of 'good sex' based on the pursuit of male sexual pleasure in brief, casual and often anonymous sexual encounters. The young men's stories were both amusing and disturbing, often suggestive of sexual encounters that could be read as examples of abusive and coercive practices that could present considerable risk to the safety and well-being of the young women who feature in these stories. We cannot know from the focus group data whether these stories are true, and the performative mode of competitive banter, joking and exaggeration (i.e. the image of a girl who has '365 cocks a year' or of Simba the Lion King resplendent under a shining light as a metaphor for female orgasm which the young men state is a 'regular occurrence' with their sexual partners) suggest that it would be unwise to use these stories as a tool for information gathering on young people's sexual practices (Holland et al 1993:13, Allen 2005b). As with the encounters discussed above, the focus in my analysis is rather on the 'social role' of these 'sexual stories' (Plummer 1995) – why are these stories being told in this context, who is their intended audience and what are the young men trying to communicate in their telling?

Whilst conducting this focus group, my main impression was not *what* the young men said but the desire, banter and masculinity that were performed for each other, for me and for the digital recorder (Brannen and Pattman 2005). The sheer noise and energy of this group was enjoyable. I found the young men funny and entertaining and when I listen back to the recording I can hear myself laughing –

something that I now feel uncomfortable about when I read the transcripts and explore the shockingly loud accounts of misogynistic disgust and the quieter, sadder story of social exclusion.

In my analysis of this focus group I have tried to hold on to my initial impression of the group and to find ways of capturing the sense of performance, energy and fun operating within the group and generating productive insights from this approach. I have found that through paying attention to story telling, humour and the affective dimensions of the group talk and through situating this talk within the 'local' and 'wider social contexts' (Phoenix 2008) I have been able to find ways of reading this data as more than just a 'sexist hangover' (Walkerdine 2011) of misogyny and the sexual double standard and to look more closely at what is going on in this group when a researcher, a sexual health worker and a youth worker ask a group of young men to talk about 'good sex'.

The 'quick beat': casual sex and female pleasure

In focus group one, Wallay oscillated between embracing and rejecting the role of the 'turbo-charged' male sexual performer (Harvey and Gill 2011b, Tyler 2004), seemingly unsure about how to respond to the *'greedy'* demands of his female sexual partners. In the all male focus group three however, the young men joyfully dismiss their female sexual partners' demands and desires and revel in their own *'quick'* performances.

> Well if she don't like what I'm working with, and how fast it's working then that's her business boy... Like obviously we can work around it, yeah? But to a certain extent really but, if she don't like my sex then obviously like

she's going to have to pick a different beat[18] innit? But if it's not my beat and she don't like my sex then I don't really care. (Whiley)

The young men talk confidently about their inability to perform sexually for longer than 3, 7, 8 or 9 minutes, with Whiley proudly claiming that he *'could phone up a chick right now'* that accused him of being 'selfish' and only lasting for 3 minutes – *'That's the kind of damage I do Graham you get me? Three minutes.'*

As in group one, young women emerge from these accounts as evaluators of male sexual performance but unlike in group one, these young women have no power to ridicule or shame their male sexual partners, since the young men have reconfigured the criteria for male sexual success. They collectively refute that it is possible for men to have penetrative sex for long periods of time - *'seven minutes plus, that's viagra'*, *'No one told me about no more than nine minutes'*, *'You cannot have sex for half an hour without nutting[19], on my mum's life!'* and suggest that young women should read their quick performances as evidence of her sexual attractiveness.

> She should take it as a compliment that she made man nut, nut quick innit? Like that's good innit? That means man's enjoying it really, if I weren't enjoying it, I wouldn't nut at all innit so? (Whiley)

The pursuit of male sexual pleasure through multiple sexual encounters is central to this group account of 'good sex' and throughout the session the young men tell amusing stories about their own or each other's past sexual experiences. When I ask the young men questions about female sexual pleasure however a different narrative emerges that draws not on local places and personal sexual stories but rather plays with images from popular culture.

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[18] 'To beat' is a colloquial term for having (penetrative vaginal) sex
[19] 'To nut' is a colloquial term for male ejaculation.

Ester: So if you were, if the girl you're sleeping with has an orgasm, how does that make you feel?

Fats: Good for her.

Steven: Just good for her?

Luke: No, it does, it does give you a little, a little, makes you feel like a *man*!

Fats: Don't be fucking special man don't -

Luke: You see where in the lion king...

Loud laughter

Luke: ...Simba...with the light shining on you.

Laughter

Luke: That's the goal innit, that's the goal of...

Laughter

Luke's comic performance delights the whole group and enables him to defy ridicule from Fats and the others and present a vision of how to incorporate ideas about female orgasm into this performance of hegemonic masculinity and account of what it feels like to be a *'man'* (Connell 1987). Luke's use of a scene from a children's Disney film to depict the female orgasm, like his later use of the metaphor of a football ceremony and penalty shoot out to describe the sequence of foreplay-penetration-male orgasm, is indicative of the ways in which these young men seem to both desperately want to affirm their authority and adult masculinity through sexual prowess, whilst also delighting in the hedonism, play and irresponsibility of youth.

Telling sexual stories: authority and disgust

Throughout the group session the young men's jokes, banter and vivid story telling contrast with the serious questions, advice and comments from the youth worker, outreach worker and I. The young men contest the authority of the educative

sexual health discourses that are voiced by Graham, asserting instead the value of their own sexual experiences as the more credible source of 'informal knowledge' about sex and pleasure (Allen 2005a, Kitzinger 1994, Kehily 2002. See chapter one). For example, in response to the young men's' claim that sex with the same person can get *'boring', 'dead'* and repetitive, Graham attempts to educate the boys on the value of a long term relationship for creating opportunities for comfortable sexual experimentation.

> If you are able to communicate with that person, what happens is those things that you wanna try out, or that person wants to try out, you can do that with that same person because they're comfortable talking to you, they're comfortable trying new things. (Graham, *sexual health worker*)

As explored in the discussion above, participants in the other focus groups embraced this discourse of comfort and intimate partner communication and advocated the benefits of an emotionally committed relationship. In this group however, Whiley undermines Graham's account through telling his own story of *'what happened last week'*.

> **Whiley:** What happened last week, the last time I left here...?
> **Steven:** I had already left.
> **Whiley:** The slag was over there and I asked her what happened. And before I know...
> *Noise and laughter*
> **Steven:** You are joking?
> **Whiley:** No, obviously. I went to [the park] innit? But man never had to speech it or do nuttin' you get me? But, I could have done whatever I wanted...It's the first time I met her in my life!

Whiley's story celebrates the pleasure of immediate gratification and the brief, anonymous 'zipless fuck' (Jong 1974), presenting a direct challenge to the

authority of Graham's account of the couple relationship as the site for pleasure and sexual experimentation.

Whiley dominated the discussion and appeared to hold a powerful position within the peer group. More than any of the other group members, he continually referenced different sexual encounters and was the most prolific story-teller within the group. These stories functioned not only to establish Whiley's authority within the group context but to mobilise affective patterns of disgust (Wetherell 2012, Ahmed 2004) towards their female sexual partners and peers. This was particularly evident in Whiley's story about a girl he and his friend had sex with in the lift at the Oxford Estate[20] near to where the boys lived.

> **Whiley**: *(to Fats)* Was you there when I brought that thing to Oxford? The thing that Trevor brought back from Kings Cross?
> **Fats**: And she stunk out the whole block?
> **Whiley**: Bruv, she stunk out, I swear to you Graham yeah, I'm beating it, and I'm opening the lift door at the same time, that's how bad it was, this girl was absolutely foul. I just had to come out of there.
> *Laughter*
> **Steven**: But had she had sex with someone else before you?
> **Whiley**: Yeah Trevor, that bastard!
> *Laughter*
> **Whiley**: That bastard violated the whole sin bruv!
> *Laughter. All talking at once.*
> **Whiley**: Uuuh she was stinking!
> **Ester**: So why did you have sex with her?
> **Whiley**: Cos obviously at first innit, cos as soon as I started you know like having sex with her obviously, the smell, just started coming up ad I was like – nah – 'llow this bruv.

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[20] The name of the estate has been changed to preserve anonymity. Other place names in this extract are as they are in the original. Kings Cross is a nearby area of London and Dalston is an area of East London with a local food market.

Fats: Off fish

Luke: Yeah off meat. From Dalston.

Mark: Off meat from Dalston!!

During and after the group session I felt disturbed by the extent of misogynistic disgust that Whiley espoused for the faceless, nameless, young women he narrated and unsettled by the proximity of this account to my own life, as I had recently lived on the Oxford estate. The specifics of the location and vivid use of sensory, embodied metaphors in this story seemed to produce a disturbingly visceral account of the 'stinking' female body. I also felt perplexed by this story; why would Whiley have sex with someone for whom he felt such repulsion and why would he tell this story of subverted masculine conquest to his peers?

After the group has finished I discussed this with the sexual health worker Graham who informed me that he had heard Whiley tell this story before. It appeared therefore that this story had particular currency for this group of young men and that part of the pleasure in the story was in its (re)telling - to the group who rewarded Whiley's disgust with their laughter and to the listening, questioning un-amused practitioners. In their discussion of young men's use of humour within secondary schools, Kehily and Nayak (1997) suggest that collective story telling can play a central role in framing classroom humour and consolidating versions of heterosexual masculinity. In their ethnographic study they found that certain events would be reinvoked for the 'shared pleasure of mutual retelling', elevating the event to a mythic status that became a key reference point against which young men would make sense of their identity within the school and the peer group context (Kehily and Nayak 1997: 76). Kehily and Nayak argue that these processes of collective (re)telling can function within a peer group to consolidate a set of sexual values and version of 'hypermasculinity', acting as a regulatory

reminder and performative rehearsal for desirable behaviour within the male peer group (Kehily and Nayak 1997: 80).

Whiley's 'sexual story' of the *'foul'* thing in the lift celebrates male sexual conquest and the particular version of 'hypermasculinity' performed in this group context, but it also makes humour from self-abasement, pointing towards Whiley and his friend's physical and moral proximity to contaminating, stinking female sexual bodies and local places. Sara Ahmed (2004) argues that disgust is performative – a speech act (that's disgusting!) that generates the affect that it names and that functions to bind together those who share a sense of condemnation for the disgusting object (Miller 1997, Skeggs 2005, Tyler 2008). In this way disgust repels, pulling us away from the disgusting object and preserving the 'low ranking of things, people and actions deemed disgusting and contemptible' (Miller 1997: xiv, Ahmed 2004: 84). In focus group three the telling of Whiley's *'foul'* sexual story functions to generate collective expressions of disgust that mark out the high ranking and moral authority of the young men in relation to the bodies of their 'foul' female partners and peers.

Doing the 'bad' thing: class, disgust and desire

Throughout the focus group the young men appear to revel in their 'bad' language and 'foul' sexual stories, seeming to enjoy performing their transgression for three adult professionals, each other and the digital recorder. They make regular claims throughout the focus group to have done the 'bad' thing – '*I sleep around blood!'* (Whiley), '*I beat on the first date yesterday!'* (Mark) - whilst also relishing in visceral misogynistic language such as *'next bitch', 'slag'* and *'grease bag'.*

In his sociolinguistic study of black inner city youth William Labov (1972) describes the ways in which 'bad' words and images – such as those evoked in misogynistic 'mother insults' – are used as a deliberate way of arousing 'disgust and revulsion among those committed to the 'good' standards of middle class society' (Labov 1972: 324). Labov argues that the speaker of the insult uses as many 'bad' words and images as possible with such familiarity that the vividness of images such as – 'Your mother ate fried dickheads' disappears (ibid.). Labov argues however that the meaning of these sounds and this ritual activity would be entirely lost without reference to middle class norms; 'sounds derive their meaning from the opposition between two major sets of values: their way of being 'good' and our way of being bad' (ibid.).

In her work on working class femininity Beverley Skeggs explores how this alignment with the 'immoral' can be understood as a deliberate strategy for contesting and rupturing middle class moral judgement and authority (2005, 2004). Skeggs argues that one of the ways in which a classed position of judgement can be maintained is through assigning the other as 'immoral, repellent, abject, worthless, disgusting, even disposable' (Skeggs 2005: 977). Designating someone as immoral, excessive and disgusting provides a collective reassurance that we are not alone in our judgement of the disgusting object, creating consensus and authorization for the dominant symbolic order (ibid..). Following from this, she suggests that one of the most effective ways to deflect being devalued is 'to enjoy that for which you know you are being condemned' (Skeggs 2005: 976) – this involves not contesting or deriding authority but refusing the authority of the judgement and the value system from which that judgement emerges.

Whiley explicitly directs his mythic story of the 'thing' in the lift to the sexual health worker Graham and part of the humour in his performance is perhaps the way in which the story - told in this way – subverts the authority of sexual health discourses and the value system from which it emerges. Whiley's story enables him to educate Graham (and me) about 'bad sex' and in doing so he claims a position of authority in the peer group, in relation to Graham, youth worker Steven and I and as a moral authority on this young woman's sexuality and body. As the young men were leaving the room at the end of the group, one of them remarked, *'Ester will never come back again'* - apparently aware, although I had not voiced this in the group, that I would object to their stories and arguably confident that their attempt to make themselves objectionable and to refuse the authority of my judgement had succeeded.

These discursive-affective patterns (Wetherell 2012) of humour and disgust and stories of 'foul' female bodies dominated the group encounter, but was momentarily disrupted in response to questions about female sexual pleasure (see above) or, as in the example below, when I asked the young men to imagine how their sexual experiences might change over the next few years. In responding to this question Luke draws not on images from Disney films or other romantic and erotic media as the young men do when talking about female sexual pleasure elsewhere but on the figure of the 'upper class' professional who populates their local neighbourhood.

> **Luke**: You know what type of girls I look for? Them sort of women that walk out of [the tube] station at half five.
> **Steven (youth worker)**: And what do you think they will see in *you?*
> *Laughter and talking all at once, calling out 'at half five!*
> **Steven**: For what reason? What's the difference then?

Luke: I dunno their upper class innit? Working secretary looking, you know the ones I'm saying?

Steven: So because they are working?

Ester: What they're rich-richer? You mean or?

Steven: Or they're working?

Graham (sexual health worker): Or is it, is it a state of mind? Because they're working it shows something about them, that maybe

Ryan: That they got self respect innit.

Whiley: Yeah, like more and more girls these days are just like on the roads, like what are you really doing, they're just like out!

Luke: Yeah, yeah, I want an older woman, I want an older woman!

Whiley: Like those 2 girls from Stevenage, what do they do?

Laughter

Whiley: They come down from Stevenage, they go jump on the [bus], they go from Camden to Holloway, to Camden to Holloway and Finsbury Park and just get battered out the whole bus lines.

Fats: Disgusting sight, disgusting.

Whiley: But what do they do?

Fats: That's why I don't want to have a daughter. Things like that. That's appalling.

Graham: So, a girl who works is more like- a girl who doesn't work is more likely to sleep around do you think?

Whiley: Yeah, a girl that don't work, just like, on the road, what's she doing, she obviously more likely to just be stepped out, sleeping about and that innit, a girl that's obviously working, whose got something-obviously something to do with her time. Like that would be the girl that would be more likely to be wanting a relationship and a proper life innit, not just going around, sleeping about.

In this account the young men reserve their disgust for women who, like them, are young and jobless, with nothing to do but spend time 'on the road' and 'sleeping around'. This 'disgusting sight' of working class female sexual excess is contrasted with the respectability and 'proper life' of older, 'upper class' professional women.

This discussion of desire for a different sort of woman emerged in response to my question about how the young men think their sexual relationships might change as they get older. In their response, the young men evoke an image of embodied class privilege and professional respectability to project a future trajectory for themselves. I remember being shocked by Steven's comment to Luke – *'What do you think they will see in you?'* that seemed to slip out before Steven could stop himself. Although the boys smoothed over the awkward moment with their laughter, Steven's comment laid bare the gaping inequality between the boys' current social exclusion and the 'culture of professionalism' (Young 1990: 58) to which they aspire to access through their future sexual relationships. Steven's comment also revealed the inequalities of age and professionalism that structure the power dynamic between Steven and the boys that may not be so easily dislodged through humour and story telling beyond this situated group encounter.

Ryan's suggestion that professional, working women have more *'self-respect'* seems to momentarily acknowledge the hierarchy of respectability that positions the young men and their young, repellent, jobless, female sexual partners as inferior and excluded from respectable, desirable, middle class professionalism. Whiley quickly closes down this uncomfortable moment however through telling a new hyperbolic story of disgusting female excess, thus re-establishing the young men's - situationally precarious - moral authority on the boundaries of good, respectable sex.

Focus group 4: The 'queer' focus group

'Free-style! Free-style with it!' (Chanelle, focus group four)

The fourth focus group that I conducted was the 'queer' focus group which was attended by three bisexual young women; 17 year olds Indiah and Rochelle who were friends from school and 19 year old Chanelle who had never met Rochelle before but knew Indiah a little from a peer educator programme that they had both previously been involved with.

Before the group started, the three young women chatted for about 20 minutes as we waited for a fourth focus group participant to arrive (he never did). During this time the young women talked, amongst other things, about the responses they had received from their family members in relation to their bisexuality. Responses ranged from dads and step dads switching off Eastenders whenever the Syed and Christian storyline[21] came on, mum's expressing disappointment about never having any grandchildren, to Rochelle's experience of being *'punched'* in the face by her father and having her family refuse to talk to her until she split up with her previous girlfriend and led her family to believe that she was no longer a *'lesbian'.*

Once the focus group 'started' however there was no talk of homophobic violence or troubled family relationships and only brief reference to the absence of *'the gay thing'* from sex education, the bible and Christian teachings about sexuality. The discussion was led by Rochelle and Indiah who approached the research encounter with confidence and enthusiasm, tucking into the food that I provided, passionately giving their opinions and telling lively stories about their sexual experiences with men and women, often accompanied by animated mimes from Rochelle. The two young women not only asserted that sex can and should be *'fun'* for both partners but generated infectious affective patterns of fun (Wetherell 2012) within the group discussion through their jokes, story telling and interactions

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[21] Syed and Christian were gay male characters on popular British soap opera *Eastenders* who were involved in a tumultuous relationship and subsequent marriage.

with each other. As in focus group three this was a space of homosocial bonding and play in which participants could enjoy identifying with each other through celebrating their young, fun gender identities and in this group sharing their experiences of 'selfish' and inadequate male sexual partners (Storr 2003).

In the previous chapter I noted that fun emerged from the survey data as a distinctly female definition of 'good sex' and pointed towards the body of scholarship that has documented the emergence of new forms of femininity characterised by celebration, freedom and fun (Kehily 2008, Hollowell 2010, Hermes 1995, McRobbie 1996, 2007, Aapola et al 2005). In the literature terms such as 'third-wave feminism', 'post-feminism' and 'new femininities' have been used to describe the experience of being a young woman in late modernity and to document some of the contradictions of this new gendered landscape (Nayak and Kehily 2008). Figures from this new, post-feminist landscape populate the focus group accounts in characters such as the 'porn star' sexual performer who gets tangled up in the good girl/bad girl binary and the successful adult role model of pleasure seeking Samantha from Sex in the City. In focus group four the young women play with these contradictions, embodying many of the pleasures and contradictions captured in the literature on the topic, with their own queer twist.

Chanelle was much quieter and less confident in expressing her opinions than the other two women, particularly at the start of the discussion. When I later interviewed Chanelle on her own she talked for nearly two hours about her low self-esteem, experiences of depression and her difficulties in 'reaching' and acting on her feelings of sexual desire (See chapter six). Her relative reticence in the group context could partly have been because she needed time to 'warm up' and join in the banter led by Indiah and Chanelle but it could also have been because

there was no room in the context of this 'fun' space of homosocial bonding and celebration for Chanelle's stories of low body confidence and low self-esteem, or for her accounts of the painful tension between her same-sex desire and explorations of the local LGBT scene and her desire for a loving Christian heterosexual relationship. When Chanelle selected statements during the discussion about love or feeling 'disgusting' when naked, Indiah and Rochelle listened politely, but swiftly moved the conversation on, for example to a description of the pleasure of being naked during sex and feeling the *naked skin* of another body next to your own.

My invitation to these three women to talk about pleasure and 'good sex' seemed to provide a space for them to celebrate what they enjoy about having sex with boys and with girls, but it also seemed to close down space for the kinds of 'haunted' stories about vulnerability and loss that emerged in other focus groups discussion and in the young women's pre-focus group chat.

'Good sex is when you are both having fun'

Towards the end of a 40 minute discussion about what counts as 'good sex' I asked the group whether there was anything they would like to add in response to the question – what is good sex? - that was not included in the cards. Indiah responded by stating - 'good *sex is when you are both having fun'*. Her statement sparking a prolonged discussion about the difference between 'fun' and serious' sex which felt like the final crescendo to the focus group discussion; a space within which the young women could show to me, and to each other, what it means to play and to have fun with ideas about sex and to *be* a fun kind of person (Hollowell 2010).

Indiah: If you're having sex and its not fun, you're thinking 'Wow I would rather be watching Emmerdale' then, you know something's not quite right with the sex but if you're having sex and you're having fun and you're like feeling happy and like you have a smile on your face after it then it was good sex but however if you have sex and you don't have a smile on your face afterwards then it wasn't fun, therefore you didn't have good sex. I think you can't have good sex without it being fun. You can't have serious sex!

Rochelle: Yeah that's what I was gonna say (*Indiah laughs*) like serious sex is boring!

Indiah: What's serious sex? (*laughs*)

Rochelle: Trust me!

Chanelle laughs

Rochelle: The boy though, the boy will just be like, (*mimes male thrusting with serious expression on her face. Indiah and Chanelle laugh*) like, just thinking too much, like you can make mistakes but we need to laugh about it, we need to sit there and joke and be like-

Indiah: I hate it when people can't laugh during sex.

Chanelle: You need to be able to laugh during sex

Indiah: Ah-ha that's true!

Rochelle: And talk during sex and be like, do you know what, can you go deeper, or whatever like. (*Indiah and Chanelle: mmmm in agreement*) Like you need, communication in the sex, like have fun with it like -

Indiah: Innit!

Rochelle: Don't be all serious like. Alright fair enough if you are losing your virginity it's a bit different, but have fun!

Ester: What does that-?

Indiah: Innit, treat it like it's your last pussy!

Chanelle: Free-style, free-style with it.

Rochelle: Innit!

Chanelle: Don't let it be structured, like step-by step by step.

Rochelle: Yeah innit, it don't have to go in a particular order. Do whatever you want - If you wanna go in your head-top, go in your head-top. (*Chanelle and Indiah laugh*) I swear, just like have fun!

Ester: So is that what fun means, like not following...

Rochelle: Yeah

Indiah: Being adventurous. Spontaneous.

Rochelle: Yeah, yeah spontaneous.

Indiah: Yeah the thing about sex that I hate is when they do the same shit every time. Like I know what they gonna do, before they do it! (*laughs*)

Rochelle: That's like grandma sex.

Chanelle laughs

Indiah: That is not. Like, when it's spontaneous like,

Rochelle: Them sexes and your like, your like, wow.

Indiah: I weren't expecting that, yeah, like one of them things like.

The young women suggest that having 'fun sex' involves engaging in certain *embodied* practices such as laughing, smiling and talking during sex, as well as adopting a 'free-style' approach to sex that is adventurous, liberated and playful. This account of 'fun sex' is explicitly pitted against an account of 'serious sex' that is too structured, predictable and conservative, embodied here in the figure of the 'serious boy' silently thrusting his body with a frowning, concentrated expression on his face.

Throughout the group discussion the young women present themselves as the female 'sexual entrepreneurs' that Harvey and Gill documented in their analysis of the reality TV programme *The Sex Inspectors;* women who are desiring and desirable, sexually skilled and competent and invested in the project of 'spicing it up' and ensuring that sex never becomes boring or predictable (Harvey and Gill 2011a, 2011b). Unlike in the reality TV show that is the subject of Harvey and Gill's analysis however, 'great sex' is not just limited to heterosexual, penetrative sex and 'turbo charged' male sexual performances. On the contrary, in this focus group discussion 'good sex' is defined by the capacity of both partners, regardless of their gender, to adventure (perhaps not too far) beyond the confines of heterosexuality and of predictable, thrusting, vaginal penetrative sex.

Throughout the focus group the young women tell stories about 'selfish' and incompetent male sexual partners – boys who *'fumble in the dark'*, *'don't know what they are doing'*, expect to be given *'heads'* without giving it back, or try and *'shank me like I'm a ho[22]'* rather than *'build[ing] it up', play[ing] with my clit'*. Rochelle's mime of the 'serious boy' embodies this figure of the inexperienced 'turbo charged' male (Harvey and Gill 2011b, Tyler 2004) who is focused on his own performance, rather than on interacting and communicating with his female partner

In her study of Ann Summer's parties in the late 1990s, Merl Storr noted the prominence of the notion that 'men are useless but we love them anyway' (2003: 162). Storr observed that this discourse allowed women to complain about men's lack of sexual reciprocity and inability to perform sexually, whilst also experiencing a sense of comfort and empowerment in their own superior sexual and emotional abilities. For Storr, the notion that 'men are useless but we love them anyway' is an example of the post-feminist values (re)produced at Ann Summers events that offer women a sense of individual empowerment and entitlement to pleasure but fail to challenge the social structures and inequalities within which these 'shortcomings' are embedded. Storr suggests that this discourse encourages women to take responsibility for the failure of male sexual technique, for example by faking orgasm, thus sparing the feelings of both their individual partner and preserving the value of 'heterosexual men' as a group. In this way, the discourse serves as a vehicle for gender identification and the expression of disappointed aggression against men, whilst accepting the inevitability of inequality and sexual disappointment for women.

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[22] Colloquial phrase meaning to have sex with me like I am a whore.

In focus group four the young women's stories of useless *'boys'* are a source of amusement and homosocial bonding, but there is limited expression of disappointment or defeat within this group space. The young women suggest that you can *'guide'*, educate and persuade a *'boy'* to give oral sex, play with the *'clit'* and go for a *'second round'* if he happens to ejaculate quickly. Further, if a girl is *'fed up of boys'*, she can always *'move on'* to girls (and switch back to boys again at any time as Rochelle points out). Part of the pleasure in telling these stories of fumbling, useless boys is that they enable the young women to present themselves as sexually confident and knowledgeable partners, evaluators and guides. In this way, although young men are called up to join in young, adventurous sexual fun, it is young women who are the natural educators and leaders of this project of explicitly youthful, feminine fun.

During the group discussion the three young women use detailed accounts of their own sexual experiences to provide examples of 'good' and 'bad' sex and to present themselves as skilled evaluators of what counts as 'good sex'. Following the above manifesto to *'have fun'* and be *'spontaneous'*, Indiah provides an account of unexpectedly receiving oral sex from her male partner. The story works as both an example of the kind of adventurous, *'free-style'* sex the young women have just been celebrating and as a way for Indiah to position herself as a sexual vanguard and as a participant in spicy, entrepreneurial sex.

> **Indiah**: Like one time yeah like, I was on my period, but like I had a tampon in yeah.
> **Rochelle**: Uuuuh I don't wanna hear this!
> **Indiah**: Shut up. Go outside then.
> *Chanelle laughs*

Indiah: I was on my period so I wasn't expecting to have sex but then um this boy that I was with, he went down on me. And I was just like, obviously I still had the tampon in - don't worry there weren't blood on his tongue and shit.

Rochelle: Uuuuh, you was on your period - oh my god!

Chanelle: Uuuh!

Indiah: I weren't expecting that so I was like, wow, check you out!

Rochelle and Chanelle respond to Indiah's story with protest and disgust, which Indiah both confidently dismisses and seems to deliberately incite - provocatively and playfully evoking the image of *'blood on his tongue'*. As in focus group three, inciting disgust is an effective tool in entertaining sexual story telling but whereas in focus group three the young men's expressions of disgust served to mark out the young female body as grotesque and *'stinking'*, in this 'sexual story' (Plummer 1995) Rochelle and Chanelle's disgust works to mark the practice Indiah describes as taboo and to signal therefore that this is a story of adventurous and unpredictable sexual practice.

Serious sex and 'thinking' too much

Throughout the group discussion too much *'thinking'* about sex is equated with an inability to relax and enjoy the sexual moment. As Indiah states earlier in the group discussion, *'if you are thinking about the sex rather than having it, you are not really going to enjoy it'*. Like the participants in focus group two, the young women in this group argue that it is important to feel comfortable with your partner in order to be able to enjoy a sexual experience. Unlike in focus group two, the young women in focus group four do not agree as to whether it is possible to feel comfortable and have 'good sex' with a *'boy'* you have just met. For Indiah and Chanelle it is important to *'get to know a person'* (Chanelle) and develop an

'emotional bond' (Indiah) with them in order to feel relaxed and comfortable. Rochelle argues however that you can be like 'two peas in a pod' with someone that you 'met two days ago', just as you can feel uncomfortable and insecure with a boy that you have known for a while. For Rochelle, levels of awkwardness / comfort vary not according to how long you have known a partner but on whether you can 'get along good...laugh together and have jokes'. Unlike in focus group two, feelings of comfort are marked not by the *passing* of time but by a young woman's capacity to *be* 'in the moment', to laugh, joke and talk to her partner and to 'not think' about what 'happens afterwards'.

The young women suggest that their divergent opinions about the possibilities for experiencing this level of comfort and enjoyment in a new or casual relationship are a matter of personal preference and individual circumstances. Indiah states that she has never had 'just sex' with a partner and so cannot relate to Rochelle's experience of meeting a boy and having 'a fun thing' and Chanelle states that she has only ever had sex with girls and that her lack of experience in having sex with men makes this a 'touchy issue' for her. The focus in this discussion is not on how to map out collective moral boundaries between what counts as 'too much' or 'too soon' but to find pragmatic strategies for young people to manage and overcome the barriers that they will each inevitably experience in negotiating 'good sex'.

For example the young women sympathetically explore the dilemma faced by a hypothetical young person who does not believe in sex before marriage for religious reasons. They suggest that it will not be possible for this person to enjoy having sex because they will not be able to focus on 'what's actually going on at the time' (Chanelle) and will rather be distracted from being in the moment by thinking - 'what would Jesus say' – a 'real turn off' (Rochelle). The young women

are full of creative and practical suggestions for a young woman in this situation however; Chanelle offers her own example of having sex with women instead of men so as to remain a *'virgin, with men'* until marriage, Indiah suggests that a young woman in this situation could find a *'middle ground'* and experiment with non-penetrative sexual practices and Rochelle suggests that she could go to Ann Summers and buy herself a *'toy'*.

The young women seem fully invested in what Laura Harvey and Ros Gill refer to as the 'makeover narrative in which self-transformation is individualised and empowering' and in which 'failure is only intelligible because participants are lazy, do not have the right products, or are not trying hard enough' (Harvey and Gill 2011b: 491). These individualised strategies for female sexual empowerment and pleasure have been well documented in research accounts of young women's sexual experiences and in analysis of a range of popular cultural texts such as *Sex in the City* (Skeggs 2005, Nayak and Kehily 2008, Hermes 2006, Zeigler 2004). In these accounts of contemporary girlhood and post-feminist culture women's expressions of individualised empowerment and sexual pleasure are both celebrated for the ways in which they seem to move beyond the 'slag/drag' dichotomy (Lees 1986) and railed against for the ways in which individualised and instrumental discourses of female 'empowerment' and 'choice' are used to suggest that women now 'have it all' and that the feminist political project for social justice and equality is now redundant (McRobbie 2007, 2009).

As a feminist researcher and youth practitioner there is much to celebrate in this focus group discussion. The young women seem well engaged with the 'pleasure project' advocated in the literature that frames this thesis (see chapter two); they set up an account of 'good sex' that embraces female sexual pleasure and same

sex desire and that challenges the kinds of accounts perpetuated in media and policy writings of youthful sexuality as dysfunctional, miserable and regrettable. Further, this is an account produced by black, working class girls, suggesting that public displays of female sexual empowerment, confidence and pleasure are not just the domain of white middle class, heterosexual adult women, as has been noted in critiques of TV programmes such *Sex in the City* (Skeggs 2005) or in commentary on processes of the 'sexualisation' of popular culture more broadly (Gill 2009).

For the young woman who was my assistant facilitator for this group, the young women's performance was inspiring, leading her to ponder 'how do you enter that world?' In contrast to Jasmine, I seemed unable to join in the playful performance that the young women were engaging in both during and after the focus group. During the discussion my voice stands out as the voice of the *'serious'* researcher, thinking *'too much'* and unable to relax and enjoy the fun group performance and experience of queer, feminine homosocial bonding. As detailed in the passage quoted above, whilst the young women are rapidly building on each other's words and feeding into each other's energy and enthusiasm to create a kind of rallying to sexual freedom and *carpe diem* – (*'treat it likes its your last pussy'* – *'free-style!'*) I keep trying to muscle into the conversation to ask what it all means (*'so is that what fun means, like not following...'*).

As I go on in the discussion to probe the young women as to whether 'serious sex' could ever be enjoyable too, I was met with confusion and resistance. A perplexed Indiah claimed, *'How would the sex be serious? I don't get it!'* and Rochelle, after miming someone being *'serious'* about sex by grabbing Indiah's arm and saying in a breathy voice *'babes I love you'*, claims that *'serious sex is for like married*

people, like husband and wife' and that *'young sex should be fun sex!'.* For the young women in focus group four, *'fun sex'* is an explicitly youthful project, which seems to play out in the intergenerational dynamics at play between the three young women, me, and my observing 21 year old assistant facilitator.

In my field notes written after the encounter I seem unsettled by the young women's account of sexual fun. I muse that the group 'didn't probe', that they were 'very unquestioning' making it 'hard to delve to the darker side'. The tone of my comments is one of disappointment as I seem, like several contemporary scholars of post-feminist culture, to be disappointed in the young women's failure to engage with the feminist 'pleasure project' which is a political project with social justice aims (Allen and Carmody 2012). Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily (2008) note that within the complex politics of post-feminism there is an emphasis on the rights of the individual to be an active sexual subject without recourse to moral judgement from feminist, as well as patriarchal discourse, producing much emotive and contested debate between feminist writers and scholars (Nayak and Kehily 2008: 59). My own response to this focus group reflects much of the emotional tenor of these debates as I seem like Merl Storr (2003) in her ethnographic account of the Ann Summers party to be disappointed that the women at these events seem to value sexual pleasure, empowerment and fun as ends to themselves, rather than as vehicles for social or political critique. We are both it would seem, missing the point that the Ann Summers party, like focus group four, is not a space for 'serious' discussion or debate about sexual or gender inequality but a space for indulging in the pleasure of female homosociality and for celebrating female sexual competence and pleasure. Whereas I was anxiously engaged in trying to find the meaning and socio-political significance of the young

women's talk, the young women in this group were engaged in the 'undeniable pleasure' (Nayak and Kehily 2008) of sexual and gender politics.

Conclusion: Emotional encounters

This chapter provides a reflective account of the four focus groups conducted during the second stage of the research. Moving across these four dramaturgical stages the chapter tells two stories; it develops an evolving understanding of young people's responses to the research question 'what is good sex?', whilst also providing an account of how the context of an encounter shapes what it is possible for young people to say, and for a researcher to know, about sexual pleasure.

During this stage of the research I found that participants responded enthusiastically to the invitation to talk with me and with each others about what counts as 'good sex', but that what emerged from the four group encounters was not a coherent account of how different groups of young people understand and talk about 'good sex' but four contested, contradictory, precarious and highly emotional accounts of good and bad sex, pleasurable and un-pleasurable sexual experience. Although there are similarities between the data from each group, 'pleasure' emerged from each situated encounter as dependent on the context within which it was created and contested.

There were however persistent themes in each group encounter such as continual reworking and reconfiguring of familiar gendered binaries in different contexts and the attempt to account for 'new' ideas about female sexual empowerment, entrepreneurship and pleasure. There is also the persistent use of temporal metaphors in each group to talk about what counts as 'good sex' and to suggest

that different temporal moments – moments in a life time, a relationship timeframe and in the moment of the sexual encounter - are significant in evaluating whether a sexual experience or relationship is 'good' or 'right'.

In each group participants use a range of cultural and discursive resources to make sense of complex and often conflicting sexual meanings and values, drawing largely on local peer group cultures and popular media texts. In particular the groups created space for commentary on characters from television programmes and films, the sexual stories of friends and peers, and for telling personal sexual stories about early or casual sexual experiences. As detailed in the following chapter, in the individual interviews family members, religion and couple relationships emerge as significant in shaping participants' understandings of 'good sex'. On the public stage of the focus group however there was no talk about current intimate partner relationships and the discussion focused rather on regrettable early sexual experiences and the horror and pleasure of casual sex. It was only in focus group four that participants told stories about pleasurable sexual experiences in previous intimate partner relationships, drawing on gendered discourses of fun, freedom and sexual experimentation to give meaning to previous experiences and to provide definitions of good, fun sex.

Differences between the four interactions suggest that debates about what counts as 'good sex' and discussions about sexual pleasure are contested and highly situated, suggesting that it is not possible to read directly from young people's talk about sexual pleasure to an analysis of gendered power relations as a previous generation of research has done (i.e. Holland et al 1998. See chapter one). One of the aims of this thesis is to make a contribution to the debates outlined in chapter two about the potential inclusion of pleasure in sexual health and education work

with young people and to consider how pleasure is embedded, marginalised and gendered in young people's sexual cultures. In this chapter I suggest that using a reflexive, situated approach to young people's group talk and 'sex-gender' displays (Nayak and Kehily 2008) about sexual pleasure offers a productive method for exploring the ways in which pleasure gets talked about in group contexts and mediated in young people's sexual cultures.

These reflexive analyses suggest that the group encounter is a productive, but challenging moral space that researcher/practitioners can create in order to engage young people in work around sexual pleasure. The emotional and contested nature of these discussions suggest that researcher/practitioners need to remain open and ready for the unpredictable nature of these encounters (Gillies and Robinson 2010) and to engage with young people's talk as examples of what it is possible to say publically about pleasure in particular contexts, rather than as an exercise in information gathering about young people's sexual practices (Holland et al 1993). Paying attention to the affective dimension of these provides insight into some of the more contested areas of sexual practice that could be ethically challenging for practitioners engaging in this work in institutional settings. This is something that I return to in chapter seven, where I provide an overview of key 'contested areas' (Rubin 1984) in young people's understandings of 'good sex' and consider the implications of the analysis presented here for debates about how practitioners can engage young people in work around sexual pleasure.

Chapter 6: The individual interview

> So from just where do we get our stories? The most apparent answer is to suggest that they simply emerge from within: through thought, through reflection, through creativity. In part this has to be true. But it is also the case that all stories emerge as a practical activity: as we go about our daily rounds we piece together fragments from the tool-kit of culture that ultimately (but maybe only momentarily) cohere into 'our stories' (Plummer 1995: 36).

In this chapter I present an analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted with sixteen young people during the final stages of fieldwork. The aim of this stage of the research was to explore young people's understandings *and* experiences of 'good sex' and to examine the resources that they use to make sense of these understandings and experiences in the context of their everyday lives and relationships. In my analysis I privilege the biographical, adopting a case study approach to explore the ways in which participants' 'sexual stories' (Plummer 1995) are embedded within their socially located biographical narratives.

The interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of young people who provided very different biographical narratives and 'sexual stories' (see chapter three and appendix L). The sample included young people who described themselves as straight, bisexual, gay, *'open'* and *'pansexual'*, young people who were born in different countries, from different religious and ethnic backgrounds and who were engaged in very different educational paths and 'transitions to adulthood' (Henderson et al 2007). In the interviews participants reported having a range of relationship experiences including having a boyfriend or girlfriend, having two girlfriends, having a one night stand, *'a one-time-thing'*, a *'fuck buddy'*, a

husband, a fiancé, 'linking' with someone and being single – 'me, myself and I' [23].

Participants also described a range of sexual experiences – from Jessica who

once kissed a boy in the second year of secondary school and wanted to wait until

she was at least twenty before experimenting any further, to James who reported

having had sex with seventeen different partners in a range of relationship

contexts and 'weird' public places.

The structure of this thesis and methodological line of enquiry that runs throughout

necessitates that I use this chapter to talk broadly about the insights that I have

gained about how young people understand and experience 'good sex' and sexual

pleasure from the interview method. In analysing the data and writing this chapter

my dilemma has been not just one of scale – there is not enough room in one

chapter to present sixteen case studies – but also one of method, as I have

struggled to find ways of categorising the sixteen unique biographical narratives

and array of rich, entertaining and mundane sexual stories that I collected.

I wanted to resist organising participants' interview accounts according to their

gender, sexuality, ethnicity or social class, as is commonly documented in

analytical accounts of young people's sexualities (Holland et al 1998, Allen 2003,

Maxwell 2006, Thomson 2000b) and have instead searched for ways to explore

how these familiar categories of difference intersect in young people's narratives

of their intimate and sexual lives. In a life history study of masculinity Connell

writes of the value of grouping together biographical narratives to illuminate

particular 'situations' in which there may be rich theoretical yield (Connell 1995:

90, Thomson 2011: 20-22). Drawing on this approach I have clustered together

interview case studies according to three key subjective categories of sexual

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[23] 'Linking' is a colloquial term for having regular sex with someone who you are not in a 'relationship' with. A 'Fuck-buddy' is a term for someone that is a friend that you have sex with.

experience that emerged from my analysis of the accounts. First I introduce the accounts of those participants who considered themselves to be 'virgins' or/and sexual 'beginners'. In the second cluster I examine the accounts of those young people who were in long-term, couple relationships at the time of the interview and in the third I consider the accounts of the 'sexual explorers' - those participants who were single at the time of the interview, sexually experienced and invested in a project of sexual experimentation and sexual exploration. In each of these clusters I explore how 'good sex' is understood by participants from these particular vantage points in their evolving sexual careers and tease out the ways in which these different 'situations' and the insights that they enable are shaped by participants' socially located, biographical narratives.

Moving through these three clusters the chapter narrates a typology of sexual experience in which a young person starts as a virgin, then becomes a sexual beginner, then enters into a couple relationship and learns new sexual skills and values, before leaving the relationship, becoming single and exploring new sexual ideas and practices. The aim of this chapter is not however to set this up as a typology of youthful sexual experience but to illuminate different situations in young people's sexual lives and cultures and to examine how publically represented identity categories – virgin, girlfriend/boyfriend, sexual entrepreneur (Harvey and Gill 2011a) – play out in the face of biographical experience.

Clustering cases in this way enabled me to examine in more detail suggestions from the focus group and survey data that participants' understandings of 'good sex' are shaped by their sexual biographies (Wight et al 1994) and to interrogate claims made by young people during the initial research stages that sexual experience is the key resource for learning and talking about sexual pleasure.

Through placing the 'connected individual' (Thomson 2011) at this centre of my analysis I am able to examine what resources each participant is able to draw on from their particular 'situation' and explore how they put these resources to work in narrating their sexual experiences and values.

Throughout this chapter I draw on Ken Plummer's work on 'sexual stories' which he defines as 'narratives of the intimate life, focused specifically around the erotic, the gendered, the intimate' (1995: 6), constructed within particular social and historical conditions that facilitate their making and their telling. Drawing on Plummer I focus my analysis on aspects of emotion, materiality and power and pay attention to the role of audiences and social interactions in understanding how and why certain stories about sex and pleasure come to be told (Plummer 1995). In doing so my aim is to identify the 'personal props' and 'cultural traces' (*ibid.*) in participants' stories as a way of understanding how sexual pleasure is embedded within young people's unfolding, culturally located biographies.

The virgins and beginners

At each stage of the research, participants told me that the best or sometimes the only way to understand and learn about sexual pleasure was to *'actually experience it'* (see chapter one) and when I probed as to how people who have not had sex learn about pleasure, I was often met with confusion, silence or uncertainty. In this section I explore the interview accounts of the four young people in the interview sample who described themselves as *'virgins'* or as choosing not to have sex at this moment in their lives. Their interview accounts provide me with the opportunity to explore some of the ways that sexual pleasure can be learnt about, understood and imagined by young people who have not yet

'had sex'.

My experience of interviewing this small group of participants suggests that it is possible to talk to young people who have not had sex about their sexual desires, experiences and expectations, but that the kind of talk that emerges will depend on participants' access to resources for telling sexual stories and imagining sexual futures. My analysis suggests that for these four young people family, friends and peer relationships are key resources for making sense of what counts as 'good' and 'bad' sex and for imagining their own sexual futures. Talk about 'good sex' focused on the importance of having sex within the right *context*, often imagined in terms of the temporal as the 'right moment' or 'right time', which for Ruby, Chanelle, Jessica and Michael was in the future, and in the context of a loving, lasting and committed heterosexual relationship.

In previous chapters concepts of timeliness, readiness and delay have emerged as moral markers for an 'imaginary line' (Rubin 1984) between 'good' and 'bad' sex (Thomson 2000a, Sharpe and Thomson 2005). Analysis of the interview data highlights the ways in which timeliness and delay and associated notions of responsibility and respectability are shaped by participants' unfolding biographical narratives and hybrid social locations. Each of these participants imagined the 'right moment' differently, but in a way that I suggest makes sense in the context of their individual biographies and future aspirations, shaped by webs of family, peer and partner relationships.

Michael: Mum's story

All four participants draw explicitly on their mum's *'story'* to explain their sexual values and decision-making. This was most explicit in Michael's account in which he describes his mum's *'story'* as the *'biggest influence ever in his life.'*

> My mum told me the story and it was, when she was pregnant and she told to my biological dad that she was pregnant, uh he said she can go to interruption [abortion] or just keep the baby but he doesn't want a baby. So he left us.

Throughout the interview Michael evokes this family narrative of male irresponsibility and female vulnerability and describes the way in which it frames his initial experiences of his sexual desire and then later his sexual relationship with his previous girlfriend of three months, his best friend when he was growing up in Eastern Europe. Unlike the three young women in this cluster who suggest that they experience conflict between their mum's stories and their own sexual desires, Michael's account suggests that he follows his mum's advice faithfully, almost as if guided by a 'mum-in-the-head'.

When I ask Michael about his early experiences of 'feeling sexual' Michael describes a process of first experiencing strong feelings of sexual desire and feeling like *'I just kind of really wanted to have sex'* and then trying *'to learn to control'* these urges and stop himself from having sex.

> **Ester**: And how do you do that? How do you control it?
> **Michael**: I'm just keeping in mind what mum keep telling me and uh that situation that there's going to be some child who is going to be, is going through what I went, which wasn't that nice. There's going to be some

woman who is not upset, but she's not happy and she won't be anymore and I just ruined two lives and I've ruined mine as well so I'm just trying to, I just, if the thing is, just about me so I can experiment everything but if I have to make some decision and it includes someone else and changes someone else's things. I have to think first and just ask them and because it's...it's not nice if I change something or change someone's life.

Sara Ahmed describes the feeling of desire as an almost involuntary pull towards the object of desire and feeling of our bodies opening up to others (Ahmed 2004: 84). In each of the accounts in this cluster participants describe how they resist the 'pull' of desire. For Michael this is achieved through drawing on his mum's 'story', which enables him to focus on the potentially risky consequences of sex for himself *and* his partner, rather than on the potentially pleasurable experience of sex or the fulfilment of his own sexual desire. As he states – *'I wouldn't worry about the orgasm, because you can try that later, that's nothing what would change a life or something important.'*

In his descriptions of his previous sexual experiences Michael tells me that he and his ex-girlfriend *'just pay attention to her, not to me...we didn't do anything with me, just with her, so when she was pleasured I kind of was as well.'* Michael states that *'the main thing that pleasures me'* in sexual encounters with his ex-girlfriend was hearing her *'sighs'* of satisfaction and the feeling that *'I'm going this and she's pleasured, it gives me pleasure as well.'* In his description of this relationship Michael presents his girlfriend as vulnerable and in need of care and protection, but also as more sexually experienced and confident than him. He talks of his concern about not knowing how to pleasure her and that he was *'going to hurt her some how'*, but that she made him *'get rid of the feelings'* by showing him how to kiss and what to do.

The focus on the risky consequences of sex generates a sense of fear that permeates Michael's account, but it also opens up space to explore potential alternatives to instrumental, goal-orientated narratives of male sexual pleasure and to consider the pleasure of shared intimacy - of 'knowing, loving and 'being close' to another person' (Jamieson 1988: 1). Michael's account captures a sense of the vulnerability of sexual learning and early sexual experience and suggests that the intimate partner relationship can provide a safe space for exploring this vulnerability and 'opening up' the body to desire (Ahmed 2004).

Previous research has documented the ways in which young men's accounts of their sexual relationships seem to be constructed in relation to the surveillance power of the male peer group (Holland et al 1998). In Michael's interview there is a notable absence of talk about friends and peers as he describes how he had struggled to learn English and make friends since moving to London less than two years ago. His account is dominated primarily by his mum's *'story'* but also by his ex-girlfriend's 'sexual story' (Plummer 1995) of having a previous *'bad experience'* which has left her *'scared of sperms'*. This small and intimate story-telling community seem to have provided Michael with a narrative of male sexuality as dangerous, risky and potentially harmful but also with a counter narrative of responsibility, consideration and care and an understanding of 'good sex' as a shared, relational experience.

Ruby and Jessica: friends - pleasure tips and bad sexual stories

Jessica, Ruby and Chanelle all state that they are *'proud'* of being a *'virgin'* and talk confidently about the ways in which they are able to exercise self- restraint

even when under pressure from sexual partners, perceived peer group norms or from the 'pull' of their own sexual desires (Ahmed 2004). As Janet Holland and colleagues argue, one way that young women can seek to be powerful, feminine *and* sexual is by locating themselves within 'a discourse of virginity, defining the female body as something of value that the young woman can give to her partner', and arguably in these cases, something that is of value to the young women's families and religious communities (Holland et al 1998:121, Holland et al 2000, Carpenter 2002).

All three young women are from religious families and were brought up to believe that sex should only take place within the context of heterosexual marriage. As Jessica explains, she wouldn't discuss sex with her dad even though she has a good relationship with him because he is *'quite strict'* and would just say *'why are we discussing this like, you're not going to have sex until you get married!'*. In her interview, Ruby does not want to name her religion or tell me the country that her mum migrated from when she was 16, although I knew from her previously completed questionnaire that, like Jessica, she identified as Muslim[24]. During the interview Ruby explained that her religion has *'influenced me in a good way'*, providing *'a bit of guidance'*. She is keen to distance herself however from her mum's *'old-fashioned'*, *'outdated'* and *'negative'* approach to sex and relationships and to present herself as *'more positive'* and *'laid back'*.

> **Ester**: And what about you and your mum, how do you get on?
> **Ruby**: It's alright. My mum and dad split up some time ago now. We have got a really rocky relationship sort of thing because she can be old

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[24] After the interview Ruby told me that she is Muslim and *'not afraid to say it'* but was unsure what box to tick on the post-interview questionnaire and seemed very uncomfortable. During and after the interview I was aware of the Islamaphobia that her discomfort seemed to point towards, as well as the moral subtext that characterises debates around detraditionalisation in which certain cultures and practices are understood as progressive and others as defensive or retrogressive (Thomson 2011: 177).

fashioned sort of thing, because I was born here I am really, I am just really like, I am not old fashioned and my mum is. It kind of clashes if you know what I mean. [...] she thinks it is good to get married young, well not young, young, but you know, she is not really keen on the fact that girls keep on having boyfriends, she thinks why are they having boyfriends, what is the point? But I am more laid back if you get what I mean? She is more negative, I am more positive.

During her interview Ruby gives a vivid account of her female friendships and activities that they engage in together - girls nights-in gossiping, shopping trips together, outings to the spa, nights out clubbing and getting off with boys, exchanging sex *'tips'* and talking about their enjoyment and regret about past sexual experiences and hopes and desires for future experiences. In contrast to Jessica who states that *'95%'* of the stories that her friends tell are *'bad'*, Ruby tells me that conversations with female friends have provided her with useful *'tips'* about how to have sex and how to turn your partner on (*'when the guy is on top, grab his bum cheek, stuff like that'*), as well as the perception that sex is a *'good thing'* involving certain practices like *'fingering'* that she *'wouldn't mind'* trying. When I ask Ruby whether she expects sex to be pleasurable she responds *'Oh yeah!'* as if the answer to my question were obvious. In her account Ruby embraces these stories that, unlike her mother's *'negative'* account, are marked by moments of pleasure, celebration and fun; embodied by confident, modern women who, like Ruby, were *'born here'* (Nayak and Kehily 2008: 59, McRobbie 1996, Hermes 1995).

Comparison of Ruby's and Jessica's accounts suggests that female friendships seem to offer Ruby a safe space for exploring the kinds of *'positive'* sexual stories that Jessica states she has been unable to access. In contrast to Ruby, Jessica states that she can only think of one story of sexual pleasure told by a friend, and

in this case she doubts its veracity because this friend *'loves to exaggerate'.*
Throughout the interview and focus group in which she participated (see chapter five) Jessica tells stories about her friends' *'bad'* sex and relationship experiences. The stories she tells are largely of young men being coercive, abusive or immature and of young women being naive, *'stupid'* and failing to *'value themselves'.* She describes one school friend whose boyfriend hit her and then told everyone *'she's a ho, she sucked my dick'.* Jessica informed me that the reason she was interested in taking part in my research is that she thinks it is important to talk to young people about sexual pleasure - a concept she had never heard of before – stating that she would have liked to have heard a *'more balanced'* account of sex at school, *'rather than just hearing what my friends – their bad experiences.'* When I ask Jessica if she is looking forward to having sex in the future she responds cautiously – *'Yeah without the negative stuff happening'.*

Although Ruby values her female friends' sexual stories as a way of developing realistic expectations, she condemns the *'getarounds'* and *'slags'* that she sees around her for their lack of respectability and self control (Skeggs 1997, 2004, 2005). Ruby suggests that she is well resourced to negotiate the precarious line between being a *'getaround'* and a *'positive'* sexual *'beginner'.* She tells me that she draws on the *'bit of guidance'* from her religious and family background to guard and celebrate her *'proud'* virginity and ensure she maintains a good *'reputation',* whilst also using the pleasure *'tips'* and sexual stories from her female friendships to imagine a positive sexual future for herself.

In her ethnographic research in Norwegian secondary schools Ingunn Eriksen describes the experiences of a young secular ethnic Norwegian girl at a school where the majority of the girls were Muslim and not ethnically Norwegian (Eriksen

2012). Caught between a sense of entitlement to sexual liberation and freedom and a desire to seem respectable in the eyes of her peers, the young women narrate what Eriksen refers to as a 'continuum of respectability', ranging from a total lack of sexual respectability to the problem of being 'far too strict' (Eriksen 2012: 159). Ruby, like the young Norwegian woman in Eriksen's account, is able to position herself in the middle of the two, maintaining her respectability but also her entitlement to (future) sexual pleasure. Positioned in the middle of this continuum, she can be both a *'proud virgin'* and a sexual *'beginner'*.

Chanelle: Pansexual and proud virgin

Chanelle describes herself as both a *'pansexual'* and a *'virgin...um with men'*. In the interview she talks about her sexual desire and attraction towards women as well as her desire to have *'emotional relationships'* with men and *'in the long term'* to get married, as a virgin, to a Christian man. Unlike Ruby who narrates herself as comfortable and confident about her own *'modern'* identity as a *'positive'* sexual *'beginner'* there is a sense of pain and confusion in Chanelle's account as she struggles to negotiate conflicting sexual values and occupy a hybrid position on both *'side[s] of the fence'*.

In narrating this hybridity Chanelle reworks religious discourses that celebrate female virginity and forbid sexual intercourse out of *'wedlock'*, to include her lesbian desire and same-sex experiences.

> **Chanelle:** In one way [it feel less sinful]. In another way it feels even worse because yeah, same sex thing. But yeah I guess with women, because a lot of the time you are not sticking things into you, they don't have any genitalia that can go into you, yeah. I think if I was a man I wouldn't be bisexual or gay. I was saying that to my friend, I don't know how you men do it, but I

can understand yeah, you doing it, but if I was a man I definitely probably would not be gay, I would probably be asexual.

Ester: Really?

Chanelle: Yeah.

Ester: And is it penetration that makes you feel...

Chanelle: Yeah I think so, I think I am really, really scared.

Chanelle tells what Plummer terms a 'late modernist sexual story', which is characterised as an 'eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past [...] doubly-coded and ironic, making a feature of the wide choice, conflict and discontinuity of traditions' (Jencks 1987: 7 in Plummer 1995: 133). Through imagining virginity as abstinence from penile-vagina penetration, Chanelle suggests that she can have sexual experiences with women without being *'devirginalised'* or derailing her commitment *'in the long term'* to get married, as a virgin, to a Christian man.

In this long interview Chanelle described herself moving fluidly between different social and institutional spaces, spending time at her local church youth group and a local LGBT group, going away on a trip to a Christian conference as well as going to Poland to attend gay pride. She talked at length about her close relationship with her mum and her Nigerian grandparents, as well as her friendships and sexual relationships with other bisexual and gay young people.

Although Chanelle demonstrates creativity in the ways in which she combines seemingly incompatible sets of rules and values, her interview account also points towards the 'psychic costs' (Roseneil 2006) of living with and in between different institutional, social and sexual spaces (Britzman 2010). Alongside her eclecticism and fluidity there is a palpable sense of vulnerability, fear and confusion in Chanelle's account. Chanelle tells me that she can't think of anything in her life

that gives her pleasure and in the interview I struggled to elicit talk about any feelings or experiences of sexual pleasure or desire.

> **Ester:** And can you remember when you, like looking back, can you remember the first time you started to feel sexual feelings or...
> *(pause)*
> **Chanelle:** I can't really remember no. I can't really remember. I just um.........no. Not really. I mean I will feel sexual feelings but I won't. I don't know. I don't...
> **Ester:** Do you feel...do you feel desire? Do you feel turned on or aroused?
> **Chanelle:** Yeah. I think, a lot of the time, especially if it's going to involve another person I just feel like, (*Sigh. Laughing*) this isn't really going to happen is it so what's the point in even trying. Kind of, kind of like that... I don't know how, I don't really know how to explain it.
> **Ester:** So the desire or the feeling will be there but you can't see a way of-
> **Chanelle:** Reaching for it kind of thing.
> **Ester:** Making it-
> **Chanelle:** -Making it happen. Yeah.

In contrast to Jessica, Ruby and Michael's accounts, there is no sense in this account of the 'pull' of desire (Ahmed 2004) that needs to be managed, restrained and controlled. Rather desire emerges as something intangible that is difficult to 'reach' in conversation and near impossible to realise and 'make happen' in practice. For Chanelle these difficulties are understood not in terms of a conflict between different sets of cultural values as my analysis suggests, but in terms of her low self-confidence, *'messed up mental state'* and *'self esteem issues'*, mobilising what Nikolas Rose (1998) terms as 'psy' discourses to suggest that sex and desire can only be enjoyed by those who have a broader sense of positive self-worth and emotional well-being.

Throughout the interview Chanelle talked at length about the difficulties she has

experienced throughout her life with being bullied at school, dropping out of three college courses due to depression and ongoing difficulties with her housing situation due to her mum losing her job and being unable to keep up mortgage repayments. This was one of the interviews in which I felt most acutely the dissonance between my research agenda and the participant's desire to tell a different story about the difficulties they were experiencing in their lives. After several probing attempts, Chanelle started to talk about the things in her life that gave her pleasure, informing me that she feels good when she gets her coursework done or achieves at college, having failed so many times, or when she is doing something she is good at like driving or when her mum feels happy. In Chanelle's and several other interview participants' accounts, these broader ideas about pleasure and self worth emerge in their narratives as more significant, and as a vital precursor, to the pleasure of sexual and intimate partner relationships.

The couples

At each stage of the research participants talked about their desire to be in a long term, emotionally committed sexual relationship and suggested that this was the ideal, or perhaps the only context in which to have 'good sex'. In this section I consider the interview accounts of the four participants who were in couple relationships at the time of the interview to explore how 'good sex' is understood, negotiated and experienced from *within* the couple project. Although parents and friends feature in these accounts as they have done in the accounts discussed above, it is current or former sexual partners who emerge as the primary teachers and guides as 'good sex' becomes a question not of *whether* or *when* to start

having sex, but of how to negotiate the frequency, length, rhythm and quality of pleasure within embodied sexual encounters.

All four of the young people in this cluster had experienced *'hard times'* and *'bad experiences'* as teenagers, including unplanned pregnancies and troubling experiences of abortion and young parenthood and educational exclusion, as well as being disowned by family members and spending time in social services care. In each of their accounts the intimate partner relationship emerges as a source of stability and a key resource for practical and emotional support. As Beyonce reflects *'nothing I have had so far has actually been good apart from him [my son], and my boyfriend'*. My analysis of these four accounts suggests that the couple relationship is a key space for teaching and learning about sexual pleasure, but that for the three young women in this cluster it is also a space of inertia, where personal desires, trajectories and investment can become restrained, compromised or stumped.

Oscar: Taking my time and showing love

Seventeen year old Oscar's interview account is perhaps the clearest example of the value of a long term relationship not just for friendship and support but for creating a comfortable and safe context to explore and gradually learn how to pleasure your partner and enjoy having sex. Oscar describes his first sexual experience within a casual sexual relationship as *'proper bad'* stating that he felt *'worried'* and *'uncomfortable'* – *'Like I felt like I was all getting itchy and like I was thinking, oh, what do I do? How do I do this and that?'* For Oscar, this experience *'ended up tragic'* as he didn't use a condom and his partner became pregnant. In contrast to this early experience, Oscar is overwhelmingly positive about his

current sexual relationship, expressing relief that he is not no longer *'a fuck up'*
who gets girls pregnant but can invest in a caring relationship with the girl he
wants to be with *'for the rest of my life.'*

Rather than embracing a sense of 'free floating eroticism' (Bauman 1998) or the
pleasure of the 'zipless fuck' (Jong 1974) Oscar's account privileges the duration
of time as a way of according a value, meaning and durability that travels beyond
the boundaries of the 'fleeting' erotic moment (Bauman 1998).

> Most boys my age just want to get it done and slip out. Do you know what I
> mean? I like taking my time innit it? Like showing love and that. Do you
> know what I mean? Just being nice and that innit?

When describing his current sexual relationship Oscar emphasises the value of
making time to ensure that sex is *'meaningful'*, that *'she's happy'* and that there is
time for the *'little things'* like *'being stupid'* or having *'a giggling fit'*. For Oscar these
experiences of *'good'* and *'tragic'* sex emerge as contingent on the successful use
of contraception and the durability of the sexual relationship, as well as on a
broader evolving biographical narrative of the transition from being a *'little fucker'*
who gets girls pregnant and gets into trouble at school and with the police, to
becoming a *'loving'*, caring partner, hardworking student and breadwinning
labourer. This is a classed and gendered narrative in which working class, youthful
masculinity is associated with criminality, smoking cannabis, stealing, violence and
educational failure, and with uncaring, irresponsible and 'fleeting' sexual
relationships. Within this narrative the couple relationship, along with supportive
youth workers, sexual health information leaflets and a local training provider are

key resources for Oscar in his efforts to avoid being like *'most boys'* his age and becoming the abject gendered and classed figure of the *'little fucker'* (Tyler 2008).

Vinnie: Learning 'to sex'

Three of the young women interviewed were in long-term relationships at the time of the interview. Like Oscar, these are young people from working class families, who were not successful at school and whose narratives revolve around the 'critical moment' (Thomson et al 2002) of becoming or not becoming teenage parents. The *'little fuckers'* permeating these accounts are the unsuitable boyfriends that the young women are carefully avoiding by securing a relationship with a *'good man'*. For all three of the young women in this cluster, a long-term investment in their current relationship creates a space for teaching and learning about sex and pleasure. Whereas Oscar emphasises the pleasure and relief he experiences in being able to have enjoyable, responsible sex within a long-term, loving relationship, the young women's accounts foreground the labour involved in negotiating sexual pleasure and the complex ways within which the division of this labour is shaped by gender and sexual experience.

Vinnie describes a transition from her early sexual experiences when she never *'really used to do anything'* and didn't *'really know what to do'*, to her current sexual experiences where she feels comfortable and relaxed with her boyfriend and enjoys initiating and participating in different sexual practices and positions. Vinnie says that this change occurred *'when I met my boyfriend. Cos then he told me what to do, like showed me what to do kind of thing. So now, I know what to do.'*

Nineteen year old Vinnie participated in one of the focus groups during which her account of 'good sex' as a process of mutual learning and exploration was largely silenced by Wallay's animated accounts of his casual sexual experiences (see chapter five). In the interview however Vinnie is able to elaborate on this account and describe how over the past four years of their relationship she and her boyfriend have been able to get to *'know each other more, so we are used to each other's bodies'*. Vinnie proudly tells me that her boyfriend says to her - and to his best friends - that she *'can sex'* and that she is *'good at it'* and that whereas before she didn't really know what she was doing, now she *'can work as much as he can'*.

In Vinnie's account, *'to sex'* is a verb that implies embodied agency and labour, as well as sexual knowledge, experience and skill. Vinnie's account suggests that there is flexibility within the well-documented 'straitjacket of passive female sexuality' (Braun et al 2003, Gavey and McPhillips 1999, Holland et al 1998); Vinnie *'can sex'* as much as her boyfriend and her skills, labour and experience have value within the partner relationship and within the male peer group.

Although she is proud of her ability 'to sex' her boyfriend, Vinnie expresses a preference for *'powerful'* sexual positions such as *'doggy-style'* or when *'he picks me up'* (sex up against the wall) because she can *'feel it more'*. When I ask what she enjoys about having sex with her boyfriend she tells me that it is the *'powerfulness'* of her boyfriend *'doing it'* and the feeling of *'it going in'* that she most enjoys. For Vinnie, the pleasure she experiences in her boyfriend's *'powerfulness'* is understood not in terms of eroticised gender roles as suggested in Kat's and Beyonce's accounts (see below,) but as a preference for being the recipient of the labouring partner's hard work; as she explains -*'I would rather him sex me then me sex him. Although he would rather me sex him then him sex me!'*

As well as documenting gradual sexual learning and increasing sexual satisfaction, Vinnie's account also documents ambivalence and discomfort about her sexual experiences with her partner.

> **Vinnie:** For about a year before we broke up, because of the way that we was going, I didn't want to have sex with him at all. Like I didn't want him near me like cos he used to make me feel sick for some reason. I don't know why cos like any time he used to touch me like he used to make me cringe…Now when we got back together it was better, like it's not like that no more. So I think now I dunno, I'm still not really bothered about it. I don't know why, but when we have it, yeah.
> **Ester:** So for you, if you didn't have sex at all-
> **Vinnie:** Oh no, I would care. (*Laughs – E. joins in*) Like just not every day but recently it's been every day but I don't, I don't mind it but I wouldn't…yeah I don't mind it. I don't mind having sex everyday but I wouldn't choose to have sex every day sort of thing.

In this extract Vinnie distinguishes between wanting, minding and choosing to have sex. To *not want* sex is to feel repulsed by sexual contact and touch, to *choose* to have sex is to actively want and desire to have sex and to *not mind* is to feel ok about having sex without actively wanting or desiring it. Vinnie suggests that although there have been times in the past when she has not wanted sex and there are times now when she actively desires sex, she most frequently adopts the 'not minding' position and *'can't be bothered'* to have sex. Vinnie explains her lack of active desire in terms of the demands of motherhood – being tired and busy with her son – and the lack of privacy she has at home which means that sex takes place in a squeaky bed, in a bedroom she shares with her son, with her mum, two sisters and nephew in rooms nearby.

Vinnie explains her former sense of revulsion to her partner in terms of the *'hard times'* she and her boyfriend were experiencing at a certain period of their relationship. When I ask, Vinnie states that she didn't tell her boyfriend that she didn't want to have sex with him as she didn't want him to think *'that he ain't doing a good job'* or that she had *'another boyfriend'*. Vinnie's account points to the 'emotion work' (Hochschild 1983) required in negotiating sexual relationships and suggests that, like Beyonce (see below), Vinnie has taken responsibility for managing her own and her boyfriend's feelings protect her partner and maintain the relationship. For Vinnie, unlike the physical 'work' of sex, this unspoken 'emotional labour' of negotiating sexual pleasure is not equally shared between partners (Holland et al 1998, Hochschild 1983).

Beyonce: the pleasurer and the boss

In her interview sixteen year old Beyonce states that she would *'rather have cuddles than sex'* and that if she could *'be in a relationship without having sex that would be alright for me.'* Since, like several of the other participants in the study, Beyonce does not believe that relationships can work without sex, she settles on a similar compromise to Vinnie - to have sex less often than she does currently; preferably once a week, rather than the current frequency of *'Monday, Tuesday ....Friday ... Saturday, it's ridiculous!'*.

Although Beyonce notes the discrepancy between the level of sexual desire and level of sexual activity she experiences, she resists my invitation to consider her sexual experiences as unwanted. Instead her account documents the nuance of sexual experience that cannot be captured by the dichotomous model of wanted / unwanted sex (Muelenhard and Peterson 2005)

Ester: And so sometimes are you, when you are having sex, are you not really wanting to?

Beyonce: Nah, I just, want it to be over, kind of thing. Cos if I don't want it and I say no then he won't be like 'ah dadadada'. He'll be alright with it. But when he does, I'm just like,' Have you done yet?' 'Ah what you tryna say?' 'Nah nah, it's not that I'm not enjoying it, I'm just tired' Like and then after I'll just conk out and go to sleep.

There is no space in Beyonce's account for *not wanting* or *not enjoying* the sex she is currently having and she rather claims the ambivalent position (in the interview and reportedly with her partner) of simultaneously wanting sex and wanting it to be over.

I interviewed Beyonce with her 8 month old son who fed, slept and cried at different intervals during the interview. The interview was short. I had only covered two of the four interview 'sections' (see chapter three) when we decided to stop as her son became increasingly unsettled - teething and suffering from a chest infection, his coughing and crying grew worse during the 45 minutes we sat in the counselling room. Beyonce remained calm throughout, patiently attempting to feed, soothe, settle and entertain him, softly admonishing him – *'Are you spoiling mummy's interview? I can never be a celebrity with you!'*

Beyonce proved to be a valuable participant; although her interview was short, she provided rich and vivid descriptions of different pleasurable, as well as uncomfortable and ambivalent experiences she encountered in her sexual relationship and everyday life. Her interview captured the intimate maternal pleasure of breastfeeding and bonding, the pleasure of indulging in sweet food, of texting friends and jumping off buses enjoying the *'tingling sensation'* up her back

and the *'big grin'* on her face, as well as the excitement of sexually stimulating her partner and having him kiss her or touch her neck.

In contrast to Vinnie who talked about the pleasure of partner's *'powerfulness'* during sex, Beyonce describes the pleasure she experiences in overpowering her boyfriend, arousing him so that *'he can't say nothing because he's getting so much, he's getting excited.'* Beyonce describes how pleasuring her partner makes her feel *'in charge'* and how as she rubs her tongue piercing on his neck or in his ear, runs her hand along his back, or makes a *'certain noise'* she can feel his body move and sees that he can't control his erection. She tells me that she feels happy as this is happening and can barely conceal her laughter as she thinks *'That's how you **know** the boss innit?!'*

In this account, Beyonce suggests that *to give pleasure* is to claim a powerful position and *to be pleasured* renders you passive and silent – too excited and aroused to say anything or take control. Beyonce is aware that she claims an unusual female sexual role in her relationship, not through reversing the traditional gendered active/passive binary documented in much of the feminist literature on this topic (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993, Maynard and Purvis 1994, Holland et al 1998) and demanding pleasure for herself rather than her partner - but through claiming power and pleasure in being the *'boss'* of pleasure negotiations. As she states, *'normally the guy gives the girl the most pleasure innit? But I like to get him more [...] excited'*. Although this does not eliminate her partner's capacity to excite her in return, she describes actively resisting the role of the pleasur*ed* through engaging in the combative process of vying to pleasure rather than be pleasured.

I get them excited and then they pleasure me after. But they never get me

excited first. I always get them excited, well they will try and get me excited and then I will just come back with something.

In Beyonce's account, the negotiation of pleasure appears as a process of battling for control in which the sequence of submitting to pleasure and excitement becomes important. Just as Paul, a young gay man I interviewed describes always wanting his partner to orgasm before he does (see below), Beyonce seems determined not to be the first to succumb to the vulnerability of pleasure.

When I ask Beyonce who has control within her relationship she suggests that it is her since her partner is dyslexic and she handles his bank account and 'signs his papers and stuff' and further when they argue she acts indifferently whereas he won't stop 'calling my phone'. Beyonce's broader biographical narrative suggests however that she has very little autonomy over her relationships and that as a looked after child with a baby on the child protection register she is subject to a high level of surveillance and control that limits who she can spend time with, where she can go and how she can parent her child. At the end of the interview Beyonce asked me to call her social worker to confirm that she had been with me so that she would not be misbelieved or get in trouble for taking her son to see friends or relatives who had not yet been CRB checked. This broader narrative points to the ways in which Beyonce's intimate relationships with her boyfriend and her child offer opportunities for pleasure and control that she finds difficulty exercising elsewhere. However, as a 16 year old woman, mother and child in care of the state Beyonce faces considerable challenges in making her feelings of being the 'boss' of her partner's body and desires 'travel' into other relationships and areas of her life (Holland at al 1998).

In contrast to the certainty, excitement and confidence with which Beyonce describes her enjoyment in pleasuring her partner with her hands, tongue and voice, her descriptions of having (penetrative) sex with him convey frustration, confusion and dissatisfaction.

> **Ester**: How does it feel when you are 'about to have sex'?
>
> **Beyonce**: (*laughs*) Um...challenging sometimes. Cos it's like...normally the guy gives the girl the most pleasure in'it? But, I like to get him more, like the more I get him excited, I feel more, in charge kind of thing. So, it feels, better, like it makes me more, more excited I don't know what it is. Cos he's so quick, like, it annoys me...yeah cos he's quick yeah, it's like, when he's finished I get really angry. I turn my back towards him, I don't want to talk to him for a bit. But when he hugs me like I'm just like hmmm...and then when I say, 'Don't like. For- like, make it last a bit longer', then I can't take it! (*Laughs*)
>
> [...]
>
> **Ester**: So what um, what is that you can't take when it's going on for too long?
>
> **Beyonce**: (*kisses teeth*) Cos it's like he's motivated himself to just go along and then like...it just feels like he's hitting me after a while. It's just like, like and then I'm just waiting like. (*Whispering*) I'm just like. Alright. (*Normal voice*) And then near the end I get a bit, back to the excitement and then, yeah, until I get tired.

Beyonce's animated account of her sexual relationship evokes a series of emotional sensations and negotiating positions. Her account evokes the transience of desire and the complexity of trying to translate feelings of desire and anticipation into pleasurable bodily sensations, through emotional interactions with another body. Beyonce also creates the uncomfortable image of her waiting passively for sex to end, feeling after a while like her partner is hitting her. This is not the image of *'ironing board sex'* that Indiah describes in one of the focus groups in which she depicts herself as lazily lying back during sex, passively

waiting to be pleasured. Beyonce's account is of passivity without pleasure, desire or emotional engagement in the sexual moment.

Kat: good sex and/or a good relationship

Nineteen year old Kat is open and detailed in her descriptions of the pleasure, pain, anger and surprise that she has experienced in her current and two previous relationships. Her interview provides a rich account of the range of emotional and embodied experiences of pleasure that can be experienced by one young woman in a three-year period, across and within three different relationships. With her first boyfriend Kat reports really enjoying the *'rough'*, *'angry'* sex that she states was the basis of their otherwise dysfunctional and at times violent relationship. She emphasises the embodied and emotional pleasure she experienced in this sexual relationship. Although she did not like her partner kissing or touching her, she describes how the sex *'felt good'* in her vagina and she liked *'all the roughness'* and being able to act out her *'proper rage'* and *'frustration'* through having sex.

> You're getting in rage. Proper rage and you just want to beat them up but instead of beating them up you have sex (*half laughs*) and you can take up all the frustration in the sex.

With her second boyfriend, Kat tells me that sex was *'surprisingly'* good and that *'he gave me my first orgasm'*. Kat tells me that she was *'shocked'* and couldn't understand why she experienced an orgasm with this partner who, unlike her previous partner, *'had a really small penis'* and *'just wanted to come quick – which he did'*.

In contrast to these retrospective accounts, Kat describes her sexual experiences with her current boyfriend as 'not that good' and voices her sense of disappointment and frustration at her boyfriend's lack of sexual experience and failure to perform and embody an active male sexual role.

> He just doesn't know what to do! (*laughs*) When a boy - I have to basically put it in, and then he does the rest but, - I like when they know what they are doing. He doesn't know what he is doing and so it's quite annoying when you have to *always* do it. It's like, get, get it now. Shit. What's wrong with you?

In her current relationship the traditional gendered hierarchy of sexual experience has been reversed, creating a role for Kat as the more sexually experienced partner with greater levels of control, but also with greater levels of responsibility for the '*work*' and '*doing*' of sex. This is new territory for Kat and although she initially thought '*Oh my God yes*' when she realised she would have more control in her sexual relationship she increasingly finds it '*annoying*' stating – '*I want you to do it now. I can't keep doing this. I feel like a man!*' Unlike Beyonce who describes the pleasure she experiences from being '*in charge*' and performing an apparently unusual powerful female role, Kat voices her anger and frustration in always having to perform the unfeminine labour of sex.

Kat's interview account tells the story of a positive transition in her relationship experiences from having two previous relationships with boyfriends who used to treat her '*like shit*' and '*basically forced*' her to have sex to her current relationship with the man she describes as her '*best friend*', a '*good boyfriend*', her '*role model*' and '*her life right now.*' Her description of her sexual experiences documents a counter transition from '*really good*' to '*not that good*' sex, suggesting that she has

experienced a trade-off, giving up the kind of 'good sex' that she used to experience for the pleasure of a loving and supportive relationship that will enable her to be the person she wants to become. In this way her account unsettles any easy equations between 'good sex' and 'good relationships' and challenges feminist debates about the contingency of female sexual pleasure and 'orgasm equality' on relationships of equality, shared agency and control (See Koedt 1991 [1973], Ehrenreich et al 1986). Yet Kat also reports that sex with her boyfriend is *getting better*' as he *'gets used to the whole routine and stuff so he knows what he is doing'* and they both learn what the other one *'likes'.* Kat also describes a recent shift in her capacity to be honest with her partner and talk to him about her experiences of sexual disappointment and desire.

> **Ester**: Do you tell him what you want and what you like sexually?
> **Kat**: Yeah. Recently yeah I have. Because I can't keep going on lying to him saying 'oh yeah it was good'. It wasn't.
> **Ester**: And how does he respond if you say-
> **Kat**: Well in the beginning he, he's, he just feels like his pride's hurt (*laughs*) but then, he's like ok, I need to do this for you cos I know...I know, I want you to feel it as well as much as I'm feeling it. So, he's doing it. He's doing it well now.
> **Ester**: Does *he* enjoy having sex?
> **Kat**: Oh he loves it. He *loves* it. I'm just like - ok! (*Laughs. Ester joins in*) Yeah.
> **Ester**: And how do you feel about the fact that he loves it?
> **Kat**: It feels good knowing that I'm doing something right. But he needs to do something right too.

Unlike Vinnie, Kat resists the 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983) involved in managing her partner's pride and performance anxiety and is able to take the risk of talking to her boyfriend about her lack of sexual enjoyment. Her account

suggests that whereas she used to collude with an account of 'good' sex that excluded her pleasure - reporting *'oh yeah it was good'* - she is now determined and able to educate her partner towards more equitable sexual experiences in which they share in the labour of getting *'it right'* and ensuring that the other *'feels good.'*

The sexual explorers

In his critical account of postmodern sexual culture Zygmunt Bauman (1998) argues that contemporary society is characterised by a constant openness to new sensations and a 'greed' for ever new experiences. This, he argues, is the 'fitness' society, which implies:

> Being always on the move or ready to move, a capacity for inhibiting and digesting ever greater volumes of stimuli, flexibility and resistance to all closure, that grasps the quality expected from the experience-collector, the quality she or he must indeed possess to seek and absorb sensations. (Bauman 1998:23)

The key player in this fitness game, Bauman argues is the 'sensations collector', the 'fit' person who seeks bodily pleasure, excitement and thrill and who fears 'unfitness' - 'the lack of *élan vital, ennui, acedia,* inability to feel strongly, lack of energy, stamina, interest in what the colourful life has to offer, desire and desire to desire' (Bauman 1998: 23).

The interview participants discussed in this final cluster present themselves, like Bauman's 'sensations collectors', as having an appetite for new experiences and an interest in exploring and experimenting sexually. Where Kat expressed a

begrudging sense of relief that sex with her sexually inexperienced boyfriend was gradually improving as he got *'used to the whole routine'* of sex, in these accounts *'routine'* emerges as a key impediment to the experience of 'good sex' and makes for a *'rubbish'* sexual experience.

In this cluster I examine the interview accounts of the four young people in the sample who were single at the time of the interview, sexually experienced and invested in sexual experimentation and exploring as a key strategy for learning about and experiencing sexual pleasure. In these accounts talk about 'good sex' focuses on the novel and sexual partners, friends, online spaces and participants' own sexual bodies and desires emerge as key resources for discovering new ideas about pleasure and putting these ideas into practice.

As previously described, this discourse of sexual experimentation and entrepreneurialism has public representation in media texts (Harvey and Gill 2011a, 2011b) and has emerged from analysis of the data at each stage. In clustering together four interview accounts of participants invested in being a sexual explorer I am able to examine how this category plays out in the face of biographical experience. In doing so I explore the different ways in which participants understand and experience sexual exploration, generating insight into key sticking points in the realisation of good, experimental sex.

Indiah: boring vs. exploring

Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2004) argue that one of the 'sexual anomalies' of late modernity is the contradictory status of sex as 'special', as existing somehow outside and apart from everyday life. The specialness of sex means that sexual

pleasure is seen as superior to all other forms of pleasure and sex is associated with passion, spontaneity and subversion, rather than with routine activities or pleasant pastimes. They argue that 'routine is, almost by definition, boring and the point of sex is to lift us beyond the quotidian' (Jackson and Scott 2004: 243). As Indiah argues in her account of the difference between *'good'* and *'rubbish'* sex there is greater value in an incompetent novice experimenter than in a well rehearsed familiar routine.

> **Ester:** What makes the difference between 'good' and 'rubbish' [sex]?
> **Indiah:** I think, I wouldn't even say experience, but I think someone who's willing to try something new. I'm not going to like sit there and criticise you for trying something new, like if you don't get it right. I prefer that you try something new and get it wrong, and then like keep doing it until you get it right, rather than you just doing the same thing over and over again, I hate repetitive sex. Like one of my ex-boyfriends, I knew what was going to happen before he did it, and it was so predictable that it just made it more like a routine rather than actual sex, which is like, go to his house, order pizza, watch a movie, the movie's going to be on, he's going to start clutching my side, he's going to start playing with my bum, blah, blah, blah, you knew what was going to happen. It was just like can't we do something different? Why are you so boring?

In this account seventeen year old Indiah critiques the idea that 'good sex' is an efficient, well-executed male performance and suggests that value lies instead in imagination and inventiveness. Here the line between 'good' and 'rubbish' sex is not between getting it *'right'* and getting it *'wrong'*, but between newness and repetition. Unlike in the first cluster of accounts however the 'new' is not a signifier of untimely, rushed or irresponsible sex. This is rather a postmodern sexual playground in which questions of pleasure relate sexual aptitude, skill and entrepreneurship (Harvey and Gill 2011a) rather than gendered moral landscapes and a preoccupation with risk, vulnerability and loss.

In this cluster of interviews participants all talked about same-sex and heterosexual desires and, except for Sarah, had all experimented in kissing or having sexual experiences with both men and women. These were not however (except for Paul's), what Ken Plummer calls 'modernist' sexual stories of identity development and 'coming out', but rather 'postmodern' stories of diversity, fluidity and the rejection of naturalism and uniformity (Plummer 1995). As Indiah tells me, although she ticked 'bisexual' box when completing the survey she usually defines her sexuality as *'open'*, stating *'I feel sexually free, I don't feel like I have any restrictions around my sexuality'*.

Indiah primarily talks about heterosexual experiences in her interview but also describes a time when *'me and my friends, we got drunk, then we kind of just experimented together as a group'*, as well as having a same-sex relationship.

> I went out with this girl for about three months or whatever, and we had sex, that was first girl that I had sex with. [...] Even though it was with a woman it wasn't really that different. I don't know, you still felt the same, it was still sex, so I don't know.

In Indiah's account same sex desire is evoked with the 'normalised and 'modern' language of sexual 'preference" (Johnson 2004: 185) as part of a broader project of 'doing whatever turns you on simply because you like it' (Wilkinson 1996: 294, Jackson 2009, Dollimore 2001). What is valued in Indiah's account is not clearly demarcated identity categories – sex with a woman / sex with a man – but the value of sexual openness and the willingness, as Indiah states, to *'try something new'* (Roseneil 2002).

In both her interview and focus group encounters Indiah emerges as the ultimate sexually desiring, sexually plural and self pleasing post-feminist woman (McRobbie 1996, 2004); a 'sensations collector' who finds in the language of sexual experimentation a way of moving beyond the kinds of limited gender and sexual roles that Kat describes as barriers to her sexual enjoyment (see above).

In the focus group in which she participated Indiah emphasised that it was possible to 'crack' a boy who refused to give a girl oral sex and suggested ways that girls could 'guide', 'show' and talk to their partners about what they enjoy and how and where they like to be touched. Indiah's accounts of her previous relationships in her interview however suggest that it is not always possible to put this role of the confident, self-aware educator into practice. When talking about her relationship with her former 'boring' boyfriend for example, Indiah suggests that although she is 'normally quite an experimental person' she felt like in this relationship 'it weren't possible to [experiment] it just didn't seem like he was willing to try anything new.'

Unlike in the previous set of interview accounts, Indiah's account suggests that 'good' and 'bad' sex are not the result of negotiated labour but a trait of the personality, bound up with the kind of person that you and your partner(s) are – boring, experimental, or as James suggests in his account, pro, or 'anti-sex'. Although Indiah may be an experimental, pleasure seeking individual, without an equally invested sexual partner her experiences of good experimental sex will not 'travel easily' between different relationship contexts (Holland et al 1998).

Sarah: trying something new

Like Indiah, Sarah describes herself as a *'sexual person'* with an interest in sexual experimentation, but is more explicit about the impossibility of putting this role into practice in the context of a heterosexual couple relationship. As Sarah states of her former seven year relationship – sex was a *'chore'* and *'it was all about him.'* She tried to 'spice' it up the relationship through suggesting introducing sex toys, dressing up and a broader range of sexual practices but explains, *'where he wasn't used to it, it felt a bit strange and it didn't make me feel comfortable either. So I just thought, don't worry about it.'*

> **Ester**: Would you have liked to have had more foreplay?
> **Sarah**: I would of yeah, but the thing is where he wasn't used to it and I wasn't used to it, I think it just wouldn't have turned out right. I did actually ask him before you know would you like me to sort of like you know, is there anything that you would like me to do that I'm not doing that I could do for you, you know like foreplay or like dress up or anything and he always said yeah but just we never got round to it.

Sarah's account highlights how *'trying something new'* can feel uncomfortable for one or both partners and how these feelings of discomfort can function as barriers to sexual experimentation. Although there may be boredom in routine, there is also comfort in the familiar, although unsatisfying sexual scripts that couples co-construct over the course of a couple relationship.

Sarah and Indiah's accounts of their former relationships are narrated in the technical language of sexual experimentation and sexual entrepreneurship (Harvey and Gill 2011a), but their accounts also point to a lack of reciprocity and female sexual pleasure in these relationships. In these retrospective accounts

there is no longer any investment in the viability of the partner relationship, shifting the focus in this accounts not to questions of fairness or the negotiation of labour over time but on being *'single again'* and being able to *'go and explore a little bit more'* and find a partner with a more equal and similar investment in having good, experimental sex. Whilst Sarah has only been in one long-term relationship Indiah describes several over the course of the interview, her accounts highlighting the contingency of the experimental project on the relationship contexts and the rich possibilities for reciprocated pleasure in a relationship with a fellow entrepreneur.

Paul: pushing personal boundaries

Twenty-two year old Paul is a music student who describes himself as a *'very lucky guy'* from a *'nice middle class background'* with parents who could afford to send him to a private boarding school out of London. Paul characterises himself as *'a very sexual person'* with an interest in sexual exploration that is *'in my blood'* – inherited from his sexually promiscuous father and shared with his brother who *'likes to push the edges of what he likes'*.

> I would say now that I am a very sexual person and I think that's always been in my blood since I was a child and I think it drives - I actually - I'm of the mentality that it drives a lot in life for a lot of people even underneath it all.

Paul's 'sexual story' (Plummer 1995) recounts his transition from child to adult sexuality as a gradual, timely journey of sexual exploration and experimentation. He starts with descriptions of childhood sexual play and *'messing around'* with other boys before moving on to his experiences at boarding school experimenting with masturbation, kissing and having oral and then penetrative sex with other boys (and one girl). After leaving school Paul goes travelling with the intention of

having *'a lot of sex with different guys and tak[ing] a lot of drugs'* but instead meets the *'perfect'* guy and falls in love, before returning to London and exploring the London gay scene as a single *'picky'* guy who manages to *'do alright'* with the guys he brings home.

In Paul's narrative sexual exploration emerges as an enjoyable journey of self-discovery that forms part of a broader identity narrative of growing up and 'coming out' as a young, mobile, upper middle class, *'lucky'*, gay man. When I ask Paul to tell me about a particular pleasurable sexual experience he struggles to remember or describe one. The focus of Paul's account is not on telling entertaining sexual stories, but on giving a broad reflective account of himself as a *'sexual person'* and on examining his sexual preferences, pleasures and desires. When I push him to describe a particular experience he pauses and recalls a time at school when he was 18 and he kissed a *'straight'* guy who he had a *'proper school boy crush on'*.

> It was one of those [...] pinch me is this real? Because literally I'd had dreams about him, literally he was in my dreams, literally and then when it happened it was just... you know? Is this really happening? Is this really real? It was the coldest, coldest December night at a party, it was outside but it was just...you know...

Reflecting on this experience Paul suggests that the pleasure in this poetically evoked school-boy kiss *'centres back to the whole chase thing'* and the pleasure he experiences from the *'ego boost'* of knowing that *'you've won'* and obtained the initially unobtainable. Paul explains that for him the *'chase'* is an *'extended version of the orgasm'* which he understands as the goal and the *'climax'* of all sexual interaction and erotic encounters - *'an accumulation of everything that has happened since you first met I guess, since your first words together'*.

Pleasure emerges in Paul's account as part of a controlled goal-orientated narrative of achievement and success that shapes his embodied sexual encounters. He likes, for example, to be the *'second one'* to orgasm as part of an *'egotistical thing of like, yes, I've done my job here'* and a *'more deep rooted...feeling of success.'* Aware of the pleasure he experiences in being in control during sexual encounters Paul reflects that he *'would love one day to be versatile'* and to feel able to *'get fucked'* - not just as a way of increasing his sexual versatility but in order to *'open up all those boundaries'* to broader, rich life experiences.

> I think sex transfers as life so much. Do I need to really let go and just completely relax and just get fucked? And will that make a difference to my outlook on life, to my interpretation of music, singing, to my, you know from everything?

James: breaking the taboo

James's account is full of descriptions of particular sexual encounters and situations within which he is able to experiment sexually, usually in public places and with new or casual sexual partners. For example, when I ask James to tell me about a particular sexual experience that he found pleasurable he describes a time that he ended up in his friend's drum studio on a night out with his two other friends *'drinking, having drugs and having sex, like in the same room as each other.'*

> There was a complete loss of inhibitions, because we were swapping partners as well. It's like there were no boundaries at all. There was just nothing was... nothing was taboo. Nothing was... no... I can't really describe it. It was just one of those things. You could probably recreate everything that led up to it but it would never be the same.

In describing these encounters James's emphasises the *'thrill'* of the unknown and the pleasure in experimenting with practices and situations that are *'weird'* and serendipitous. In contrast to Paul, James rejects the traditionally gendered role of the all-knowing male who is always in control of the timing and sequencing of his and his partners' pleasure (Holland et al 1998, Harvey and Gill 2010). James rather highlights the pleasure of powerlessness and in having *'no idea what to do'.* In his descriptions of casual sexual encounters it is the young women that he meets who initiate sex – pulling him into toilets on an aeroplane or at a gig.

> The last time I had sex was at a gig and with the person during - right in the middle of the gig and then afterwards again in the toilet and I just felt euphoric about that because it started off where I was behind the person and they just kept grinding on me the whole... through the whole opening acts and, yeah, they just turned round, looked at me, kissed me a bit and turned back to face the band, lifted up their skirts and just sort of literally pulled my jeans down and that was it. And it felt like it was really a bit of a taboo that you're breaking. And at the same time, there was a risk of getting caught. Because it was in the middle of 3000 people. So that... that was absolutely nerve-wracking but, at the same time, it was just amazing.

Whilst James had a number of sexual stories to tell about having sex in *'weird'* places with strangers, in groups and with his two *'fuck buddies'*, he also talked about the feeling of being heartbroken when he found out that two of his best friends (one of whom was also his girlfriend) were having a relationship behind his back.

> I'd love to be in a relationship. The thing that really, really tears me up is like you walk down the street and you see a couple together and it just tears me to pieces....I just feel like crap. Because I know... I remember exactly what it was like to be like that and it just really hurts.

The tension between the 'durable emotional tie' of romantic love (Giddens 1992: 2) and the desire to explore sexually runs throughout these four accounts. Paul expresses his desire to dedicate his *'sexual life to one person'* but admits he thinks he would struggle to be monogamous since he *'love[s] sex with different people'*, and Sarah wrestles with a desire to be single and *'explore a little bit more'* and a desire to get pregnant and have a child with her now ex-husband. Like Sarah and Indiah (in some of her past relationships), James reports having limited success at being able to enjoy good, experimental sex in the context of a heterosexual couple relationship. For James this was the experience of having a relationship with a partner who he describes as *'kind of anti-sex.'* James felt his partner was *'only having sex for the sake of having sex'* and that her lack of interest and enjoyment in sex was having a negative *'impact'* on their relationship. This relationship ended after James challenged his partner and she admitted that she did not want to and was not enjoying having sex with him.

Unlike James's descriptions of looking online and trying out new sexual practices with his *'fuck buddies'*, in this relationship there is no shared investment in the project of 'good sex' and sexual experimentation. James's account highlights the ways in which investment in sexual entrepreneurialism not only emerges as a key component of what 'counts' as 'good sex' but as essential for the viability of the partner relationship (Harvey and Gill 2011a). Unlike the previous cluster of accounts, James suggests that being 'pro' or 'anti' sex is not something that is contingent on the relationship context or something that can be nurtured or developed over time but is rather a quality that each individual brings – or fails to bring – to the couple project.

Conclusion: Telling sexual stories

One of the aims of this study is to explore whether, and how, it might be possible to talk to young people about sexual pleasure in different research contexts and to explore the implications of these methodological insights for practice. This stage of research suggests that it is possible to talk on a one to one basis with young people – young men and young women who have and who have not had sex - about their understandings and experiences of sex, pleasure and desire, but that there is considerable variety in the kinds of talk that is possible in these interactions and a number of potential challenges in carrying out this work in practice settings.

For some participants the interview provided a cathartic and reflective 'safe space' (Fine 1988) to talk about things that they hadn't *really thought about in a long time'* (Paul) and to tell stories that worked through contradictory emotions and difficult life experiences. As Kat reflects at the end of her interview, *"I basically just told my whole life story (laughs) ...I guess I just needed to talk to someone as well...that was good though. That talk made me feel better.'* For other participants, such as Indiah and James, the interview provided a space to tell seemingly well-rehearsed sexual stories (Plummer 1995: 41), narrated with confidence and coherence often with little space for reflection, challenge and emotion. Other accounts offered fragments of stories as participants and I struggled to identify the right question, language or 'personal prop' (Plummer 1995) required to construct a sexual story out of ambivalent, previously un-thought of or contradictory experiences.

My analysis suggests that all participants had access to moral languages for distinguishing 'positive' and 'negative', 'good' and 'bad', 'boring' and 'interesting' sex, mapping different lines between what is 'right' and 'not right' for themselves and for others. Some were also able to deploy technical languages of sex and pleasure to describe particular sexual practices, scenarios or provide practical pleasure 'tips'. Whilst these technical languages provided participants with the resources to tell entertaining, cautionary or coherent 'sexual stories' and provide descriptive accounts of 'good sex', they did not always enable participants to carve out spaces to talk about their own embodied experiences of loss, confusion and discomfort, particularly when these experiences could not be easily categorised according to the familiar binaries of good/bad, male/female, wanted/not-wanted. In the accounts of the sexual explorers in particular the language of sexual experimentation and entrepreneurialism created an agentic framework within which negative sexual experiences do not have a meaningful place.

Taken together the 'sexual stories' presented in this chapter highlight the heterogeneity of urban youth sexual cultures, suggesting as Weeks has claimed, that 'we can now tell our sexual stories in a huge variety of ways' (Weeks 2007: 10). As described in the two previous chapters, the data generated at each stage of the research documents the diversity of young people's understandings of 'good sex' and the range of resources for making sense of these sexual meanings and values. Moving the biographical lens over the study of 'good sex' in this final stage of the research enables me to explore the ways in which young people's understandings of 'good sex' are shaped by, and contingent on, their evolving biographical narratives and social locations. Through structuring my analysis according to participants' 'situation' (Connell 1995) at the time of the interview I

also highlight the contingency of these sexual meanings on participants' unfolding sexual biographies.

Clustering participants' sexual stories together according to subjective categories of sexual experience suggests a relationship between participants' stage in their sexual career and their understandings of 'good sex'. It also however highlights the ways in which participants at similar stages in their sexual careers have differential access to resources for making sense of sexual meanings and values. The accounts of the virgins and beginners for example may all highlight the value of timeliness, delay and intimacy, but their individual biographical resources shape the ways in which they imagine their future sexual experiences and their expectations for future pleasure, fear and loss.

Drawing on Plummer, in each cluster we can see the importance of access to 'story-telling communities' to support and validate participants' identities as virgins, partners and single explorers; providing access (or not) to different representations, relationships and public spaces for exploring different aspects of erotic and gender experience (Plummer 1995: 151). After the interview with Michael he emailed me to thank me for the opportunity *'to talk about sex'* and to tell me that our conversation had led him to question what he is doing and what he wants for the future. I have wondered what he meant by this and what future decisions he has taken, as well as reflecting that his email suggests that the research encounter provided him with an opportunity to have an audience for his own 'sexual story' that he is not readily able to access. In the final chapter I return to these themes to consider what kinds of conversations about sex and pleasure might be possible in different practice settings and to address whether it is possible to create 'communities of support' (Plummer 1995) in institutional

contexts for telling and listening to (feminist) stories about 'good sex' and sexual

pleasure.

Chapter 7: Possibilities for pleasure

This thesis follows my methodological journey through the three stages of fieldwork and is structured according to the methodological line of enquiry that informs the research questions and study design. This structure has enabled me to consider what it is possible to know about young people's sexual lives and cultures from using each method of data collection and to use different methods of data analysis to ask overlapping, but distinct research questions. Jennifer Mason (1996, 2006a, 2006b) argues that the strength of multi or 'mixed' methods research is that it presents the opportunity for dialogue and 'creative tension' (2006a: 10) between different methods and approaches and the distinct forms of knowledge that they produce. Mason suggests that rather than producing one integrated account or a series of parallel accounts of the research subject, good mixed methods research uses 'multi-nodal' and 'dialogic' explanations based on a 'dynamic relation of more than one way of seeing and researching' (2006a: 10).

The structure of this thesis and the approach that I have adopted in this study has enabled me to play to the strength of each method and allow its distinctive strengths and potential to flourish (Mason 2006b), but it has arguably limited possibilities for 'dialogic' explanations of the research subject (Mason 2006a). In this final chapter I bring the three parallel accounts of young people's understandings of 'good sex' into dialogue and consider what insights are possible from this more dynamic approach that recognises that the social world is 'multi-dimensional, and that different dimensions might exist in an uneasy or messy tension, rather than being neatly integrated (Mason 2006a).

My aim in this chapter is to address the following research questions and to revisit the debates outlined earlier about the potential inclusion of pleasure in sexual health and sexuality education work with young people.

1. What methodological approaches and tools can be used to carry out ethical and productive research on sexual pleasure with young people?

2. How do young people understand and experience 'good sex' and sexual pleasure and what resources do they draw on to make sense of these understandings and experiences in the context of their everyday lives and experiences?

In addressing these questions and considering the implications for the theory and practice of the youth pleasure project my focus shifts in this final chapter from asking what can we *know* about how young people understand 'good sex' and how pleasure is embedded in young people's sexual cultures, to what can we *do* with these understandings in contemporary political, policy and institutional contexts.

Methodological possibilities and practices

One of the aims of this study is to explore the methodological possibilities for researching sexual pleasure with young people. In this section I provide a reflective account of the different methods and research practices used in the study, pulling together insights recorded in previous chapters to address this research aim and make suggestions for future research in this area. My discussion focuses initially on methods of data collection and ways of engaging young people

in conversations around 'good sex' and sexual pleasure and secondarily on the methods of data analysis used and the limitations of my approach for contributing to wider debates about youth sexualities and social change.

Possibilities for talking

My focus on exploring the methodological possibilities for researching sexual pleasure with young people is informed by a feminist research agenda that aims to 'give voice' to experiences of sexual pleasure and desire that are presumed to be 'largely unspoken in the larger culture' (Tolman and Szalacha 1999: 13). This feminist research agenda has synergies with participatory youth work and research traditions that aim to give voice and agency to a relatively powerless socio-economic group that are frequently demonised or victimised in media and policy representations (France 2007). These debates highlight the challenges and potential ethical dilemmas of inviting young people to talk about sexual pleasure within research contexts shaped by regulatory peer and social norms and unequal power relations between researcher and researched. In particular feminist researchers have noted the difficulties that young women face in accessing embodied and positive languages for talking about sexual pleasure and desire in research and 'official' spaces (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994: 138. Also see Frith 2000: 281, Holland et al 1998, Mitchell and Wellings 1998, Wight 1994, Robinson et al 2007).

Having engaged with these debates prior to starting fieldwork, a key question for me was whether it would be possible to have conversations with young people about sexual pleasure; would practitioners grant me access to talk to young people about this controversial topic? Would young people be willing to talk to me

and even if they wanted to, would we be able to find a common language for talking about the 'missing discourse' of embodied pleasure and desire? My experiences of conducting exploratory and pilot group work at local further education college added another dimension to these concerns as I wondered whether it would be possible to talk to 'virgins' about sexual pleasure or whether I would be met with continual retorts of *'well I'm not going to say anything anyway!'* as one young women expressed, or gentle reprobation from gatekeepers that *'it would have been good if they had met you first before coming to talk to them about something so personal'* (See chapter one).

My experiences of conducting eight months of fieldwork in North London suggests that it is possible to engage young people in 'conversations' about 'good sex' and sexual pleasure using a range of research methods. These conversations were possible in groups and one-to-one research contexts and as part of casual conversations as questionnaires were completed and I hung around in various institutional settings. They were possible with young men and young women from diverse religious, ethnic and economic backgrounds with wide ranging levels of sexual experience. As reflected in chapter three I was able to gain access to a range of institutional settings within which I could spend time with practitioners and groups of young people talking about their sexual values and opinions about the potential inclusion of sexual pleasure in sex education, sexual health and youth work practices. Rather than being met with silence or disapproval I found that the practitioners and young people that I met were largely enthusiastic about the research and keen to debate the topic, with much larger numbers of both young people and practitioners volunteering to take part in the research than I had originally anticipated.

Using the survey method at this initial stage enabled me to obtain an overview of young people's views on sex and relationships and to map patterns in participants' perspectives, but it was often the conversations that I had with young people whilst I helped them fill in questionnaires or whilst I hung around in waiting rooms or at youth groups that generated insight into the more challenging and contested areas of 'good sex'. For example, I met one young gay man at a youth club who told me as I helped him to fill in his questionnaire about his experiences of 'barebacking' on Hampstead Heath and finding out the previous week that he was HIV positive. I met another young man at a social services centre who was a Jevovah Witness and talked at length as he completed his questionnaire about his casual sexual relationship with a girl he met online and his sense that his soul was chained to the souls of every girl he had ever had sex with, meaning that he would have to confront them all in the future at the gates of heaven. The insights from this stage of the study point to the benefits of using ethnographic methods for engaging vulnerable and 'hard-to-reach' young people like these two young men, who despite enthusiasm for the research topic and a desire to explore its complexities, were unable to participate in more formal research interventions. I would suggest that the ethnographic potential of this stage of the study could be developed in future research in order to further explore what kinds of conversations it is possible to have about these challenging topics with often very vulnerable young people in different institutional settings.

During fieldwork and during the exploratory and pilot stage of the research I found group work to be a highly productive method for developing and piloting resources for work around sexual pleasure and for exploring how different accounts of 'good sex' accrue and loose value through group interaction, talk and patterns of affective practice (Wetherell 2012). In chapter five I suggested that setting up a

group space for young people and asking them about 'good sex' and sexual pleasure can create spaces for critical discussion, performance, story telling, fun, learning and debate. I am not sure whether the activity that I used in these sessions always generated talk about sexual pleasure, but rather that it created opportunities for talking about and expressing a range of ideas and emotions relating to aspects of difference, experiences of exclusion, aggression and loss, as well as the opportunity for group homosocial bonding and fun. As I have argued however, it is within these contested political, moral and playful spaces that young people's experiences and understandings of sexual pleasure are made meaningful; a finding that I argue below has implications for the theory and practice of the youth sexuality pleasure project.

Each of the encounters that I staged was a one off intervention in young people's lives, limiting the opportunity for me to build relationships with participants over time and explore the limits and boundaries of what it was possible to say and to do as a group forms, storms and norms and performs over time (Tuckman 1965). My experiences as a practitioner and evidence from extended participatory and community projects suggests that creating and sustaining a 'safe' group space over time makes it possible to explore some of the more contested and emotive areas of this work (Askins and Paine 2011, Torre et al 2008). Reflecting on a year long youth participatory project, Maria Elena Torre and Michelle Fine for example suggest that they were able to use the theory/method of the 'contact zone' for co-creating 'politically and intellectually charged spaces' within which they could question, experience and analyse power inequalities together (Torre et al 2008: 24). As one of the youth researchers from the project reflects, 'Rather than having to create a safe space for and by ourselves, each week we found ourselves being pushed by adults to re-evaluate our comfort zones, be them political, social, or

poetic. I felt that by the end of the year long *Echoes* project, there were no barriers among us' (Youth Researcher Kendra Urdang in Torre et al 2008: 26). Whilst debates about the theory/method of participatory and community youth work are beyond the scope of this thesis, I would suggest that this is fertile ground for considering how brief interactions and situated conversations staged by researcher/practitioners can be 'scaled up' to have personal and socially transformative effects that 'cross space, place and time in unforeseeable ways' (Askins and Pain 2011: 809).

The data presented in chapter six suggests that it is also possible to have conversations with young people in one-to-one interview contexts about their understandings and experiences of 'good sex' and sexual pleasure. As previously described, the quality and intensity of these encounters varied as some young people used the interview as a cathartic space to talk about traumatic experiences of abortion, impending homelessness or a personal history of violence, whilst others used the space to tell well developed sexual stories and demonstrate their skills as competent sexual actors and responsible sexual subjects. The data document the limitations of language for describing experiences of pleasure and desire, such as when Chanelle struggles to articulate her feelings of needing to *'reach'* for her desire, but they also suggest that young people are able to access and put to work a range of discursive and affective frameworks for articulating and understanding their experiences and moral values (Holland at al 1998, Sharpe and Thomson 2005).

Rachel Thomson and Janet Holland (2003) make the distinction between *biographical time* – the speed at which life events unfold for the researched (and the researcher), and *research time* – the timetable of the research process, and

analytic time – the longer and recursive project of thinking and writing about data. The three stages of fieldwork summarised above took place over an eight-month period with gaps in between each stage for data transcription and analysis. When recruiting participants to take part in the interviews during stage three of the research I became aware of the incongruity between the long, slow pace of my PhD *research time* and the rapid, urgent pace of some participants' lives and their *biographical time.*

On reflection (writing now in *analytic time)* my strategy of using the survey to generate participant samples for subsequent research stages would have been more successful had the different methods been used concurrently or much closer together in time. When designing the research I had not fully considered the ways in which young people's lives would change between the different stages of the research as they moved houses, changed mobile numbers, started and ended relationships, begun new courses and jobs, started having sex, became pregnant and got arrested. Not only were most of the 82 young people who volunteered in April no longer contactable or interested in the research by November, their sex and relationship 'situation' (which my analysis suggests is important in shaping understandings of 'good sex') had often shifted. When I first met Sarah for example in April 2010 she was married to her partner of 7 years. When I interviewed her seven months later she had separated from her partner, was in the process of getting divorced, trying to enjoy being single, going on dates and having sex with new partners (as well as finishing her degree, becoming unemployed and moving to her grandparents where she was sleeping on the sofa). I have since wondered what account of her relationships she would have given had I interviewed her seven months earlier and how her different situation may or may not have shaped her understandings of 'good sex'.

These reflections suggest that the use of longitudinal methods could further develop some of these insights in future research. The repeat interview method could for example be used to further explore the finding from the interview data analyses that young people's understandings and experiences of pleasure are 'context specific' (Holland et al 1998) and to examine how changes in young people's relationship status impact (or not) on their sexual values and understandings of 'good sex' over time.

As described earlier I originally intended to have a fourth research stage focusing on practitioners' views of the 'pleasure project' and carried out an initial survey of practitioners to inform this work. Due to time constraints and concerns about generating 'too much' data I did not continue this line of enquiry but would suggest that this could be a productive area for future research. Practitioners that I met were intrigued and largely enthusiastic about my research with several practitioner groups asking me to come back and report on my research findings. I was also asked to contribute to developing a new SRE secondary school resource pack where I found that the team welcomed suggestions about how to include ideas about pleasure into the learning outcomes and educational resources. These experiences suggest that there is rich potential for future collaborative work with practitioners aimed at documenting existing practices around sexual pleasure and building on the insights from this study to develop and pilot new projects and ideas. A starting point for this might be, as one practitioner wrote on her questionnaire, – 'we could have a workshop to bring together ideas and work out what might be the most appropriate way to discuss sexual pleasure with young people.'

Possibilities for listening

An aim of this study is to use the empirical and methodological insights from the research to contribute to debates about the potential inclusion of pleasure in sexuality education and sexual health frameworks and practices. This process of 'speaking back" to the literature involves making an analytical journey from young people's talk about 'good sex' – their storytelling, jokes, survey responses and affective performances – to the theoretical debates about sexuality, gender, health, education and pleasure that are set out in chapter two. My experiences of analysing the data and writing this thesis suggest that it is perhaps more straightforward to mobilise conversations about pleasure with young people than it is to make the analytical journey and make sense of the contradictory, contested and emotional talk that emerges from these encounters. Throughout this thesis I have argued however that using a reflexive, situated approach is a productive method for making this journey, unclogging my feminist ears (McClelland and Fine 2008) and developing the art of listening carefully to 'background' and 'half-muted' accounts of pleasure and desire (Back 2007: 8).

Although adopting this approach enabled me to put on the analytic 'brakes' (McClelland and Fine 2008) and avoid reading each of the focus group or interview accounts as celebratory or pessimistic narratives of (a lack of) progressive social change (Johnson 2004), it limits the scope of this thesis for commenting more broadly on young people's sexual cultures and for contributing to some of the debates outlined in chapter two about how young people are negotiating sexual pleasure, empowerment and safety in an increasingly sexualised, global and digitalised world (Harris 2005, Holland and Thomson 2010). Whilst the aim of this research is not to address the extent to which young

people's sexual cultures have changed over the past three decades, or to map the extent to which (female) pleasure may or may not be 'still missing', it does intend to contribute to a feminist research/practice agenda and 'sociological conversation' about 'the possibility of living otherwise' (Back 2007: 184).

When I explored alternative analytic approaches however, such as using Rubin's (1984) 'charmed circle' of hierarchical sexual values to identify patterns in the data and to contribute to ongoing debates about sexual practices and social change, I found that such an approach could not help me to explain patterns of diversity and difference in participants' 'sexual stories' and in each group encounter. It was rather Rubin's concept of the disputed, historically situated 'imaginary line' between 'good' and 'bad' sex (1984) that I found useful for identifying key contested areas of meaning and value. In my research I have used this concept inductively – not to map the vanguard or the disappearance / continuation of the charmed circle binaries – but to map queer areas of in-betweeness, conflict and intensity of affect (Wetherell 2012) that had emerged from my analysis of the data. Whilst I argue that this approach enabled me to generate rich insights into young people's sexual lives and cultures, its benefits for 'speaking back' to the literature and suggesting ways forward for practice are perhaps not as immediate as a new visual tool, a re-drawing of the homosexual/heterosexual binary or a gendered map of the missingness of pleasure and desire.

In section three of this chapter I argue however that this reflexive, situated approach generates useful insights and 'practical knowledge' (Nolas, forthcoming 2014) for practitioners wanting to engage young people in work around sexual pleasure, enabling a focus on the generative potential of group interaction as a site for learning, meaning-making and imagining otherwise (Back 2007).

What is 'good sex'?

Using different methods, this study has generated a series of 'snapshots' of contemporary urban youth cultures, locating each within local and wider social contexts (Phoenix 2008). These snapshots are suggestive of an increasingly pluralistic sexual culture in which there is evidence, as other studies have documented, of both social change and continuity in relation to youth, gender and sexuality (see Holland and Thomson 2010). In this section I bring insights from the previous three chapters into dialogue to provide an overview of the ways in which understandings of 'good sex' and sexual pleasure are contested, valued and embedded in the sexual lives and cultures of the young people I have been researching.

Young people's understandings of 'good sex': diverse, contingent and uneven

The data generated at each stage of the research documents the diversity of young people's understandings of 'good sex' and sexual pleasure. Analysis of each data set suggests that young people have access to a range of competing discourses that provide frameworks for making distinctions between what counts as 'good' and 'bad' sex (Sharpe and Thomson 2005, Holland et al 1998:77), but that this access is uneven and shaped by social locations and sex and relationship experiences. In chapter four for example I detail the way in which definitions of 'good sex' as fun, romantic or loving were gendered, with more female than male survey respondents employing these concepts to define 'good sex' and imagine their sexual futures. Other themes in the survey data such as mutuality and the reciprocity of pleasure were not gendered however but were rather patterned by participants' age, relationship status and level of sexual experience. These

indications were supported by the qualitative data, which suggest that as young people become more sexually experienced they increasingly understand 'good sex' as a shared, negotiated and embodied project rather than in terms of abstract terms and concepts.

As well as documenting the range of *discursive* resources that participants draw on to describe their sexual experiences and map out the boundaries around 'good sex', my analytic approach also foregrounds the diversity of emotional registers employed in these meaning-making processes (Wetherell 2012). Participants both *talked about* different emotional registers in order to define 'good' and 'bad' sex, stating for example that good sex is when you *'feel comfortable'* or bad sex is when you are *'bored'* as well as expressing or realising (Wetherell 2012: 24) different emotions in their laughter and talk (Brannen and Pattman 2005: 232).

In the previous two chapters, approaching each focus group and interview encounter as a kind of 'affective theatre' I mapped a range of affective performances and textures that I suggest are used to describe pleasurable and un-pleasurable sexual experiences and to draw 'imaginary lines' (Rubin 1984) between good and bad sex. In my analysis I foreground the ways in which key affective patterns of disgust, comfort, concern, fun, boredom, excitement, frustration, fear and loss are shaped by the dynamics of the research encounter and by participants' gendered and class locations and sexual experience status.

My analyses document how these different patterns of affect can thread through an interaction in complex ways, giving rise to different kinds of emotional, gendered sexual subjects (Ahmed 2004, Wetherell 2012:12, Tyler 2008); in the focus group data there is the disgusting *'slag'* who has *'365 cocks a year'*, the

troubled, raped or bullied girl who has sex because she *'needs'* to, rather than because she wants to and the lazy, bored sexual adventurer who lies back for some *'ironing board sex'*. There was also the haunted sexual beginner whose sexual career starts with a failed masculine performance, the star performer with *'pace and power'*, the *'sheep'* who follows his male peers but can be *'cracked'* by a persuasive woman and the uncaring *'hood rat'* who values neither himself nor his partner. These emotional, highly gendered and largely heterosexual subjects also materialise in participants' interview narratives, always as embodiments of 'other' young people. These emerge alongside a different set of less caricatured and explicitly gendered figures that participants claim to embody themselves – the virgin, the sexual beginner, the girlfriend / boyfriend, the sexual experimenter, the sexual learner, teacher and abstainer.

Adopting a situated approach to data analysis and reporting on each data set (and each group encounter) separately suggests that what it is possible to say about 'good sex' will depend on the research method used and the context within which the interaction takes places. For example, analysis of the survey data suggests that there is limited evidence of an instrumental language of sexuality in young men's responses as has been documented in previous research (Holland et al 1998). Rather there was evidence that male respondents were able to draw on a wide range of conceptual and linguistic resources to define 'good sex', with many providing passionate and evocative descriptions; *'exciting, 2 hour lasting, comfortable, mind blowing'*. The data from focus group three however indicates the ways in which this diversity of meanings can become closed down within the context of the male peer group (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002, Holland et al 1998) and the intergenerational and class politics at play in this session. Although the young men in focus group three drew on a range of discursive resources to

offer accounts of 'good sex', the dominant affective pattern was one of ridicule and disgust which frequently blocked opportunities to explore alternative pleasures and desires to that of the *'quick beat'* in the park with the *'slag'*. Notably in this group it was in response to my questions about female sexual pleasure that this dominant account was disrupted, as the young men drew on metaphors from Disney and football, romance and erotica to talk about the pleasure of giving a woman an orgasm or creating a sensual scene for 'her pleasure'.

Different young men took part in each stage of the research but each method also created a different staging for 'doing boy' (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002). As previous research has documented, in the individual interviews young men constructed themselves as more mature, responsible and caring than other boys their age, showing themselves as more 'soft', 'serious' and positive about girls and their intimate relationships (*ibid.*). As Oscar stated, *'Most boys my age just want to slip in and get out, but I like to take my time... show love and that.'* There was no talk of *'slags'* in the individual interviews with young men; rather the gendered abject figure that emerged from these accounts was the uncaring, uneducated *'little fucker'*, the *'bad man'* who treats women like they are *'dirt on the floor'* and whose excessive behaviour leads to violence, prison and teenage fatherhood.

Bringing the analyses from the focus group and interview data points to similarities, as well as differences, between group and one-to-one talk about 'good sex'. In the 'queer' focus group, as in the narratives of the sexual explorers, talk about 'good sex' focused around themes of adventure and pushing taboo sexual boundaries. In the sexually 'inexperienced' group and the accounts of the virgins and beginners 'good sex' was only imagined as possible within the context of a loving or intimately connected, long-term relationship in which partners felt

comfortable with each other. These patterns point to the significance of sexual experience categories in shaping young people's understandings of 'good sex' and suggest that differences between accounts cannot be accounted for only in terms of method and the 'local' context of a research encounter.

In my analysis of the interview data I resisted categorising participants' interview accounts according to their gender, sexuality, ethnicity or social class, exploring the ways in which these familiar categories of difference intersect in young people's accounts of how they have learnt about and experienced their sexualities and sexual desires. It is however no coincidence that the typology of sexual experience that I created is patterned with social differences; all three young women in the 'couples' cluster were Black Caribbean, working class, had not been initially successfully at school and had all been pregnant as teenagers. All three young women in the 'virgins' cluster were from religious families who had migrated to the UK from more sexually conservative national contexts and all intended to go to university. Three of the sexual explorers were White British and although from different class and family backgrounds were all current, former or aspiring university students. This complex picture of 'super-diverse' urban youth cultures (Back 1996, see chapter three) suggests that young people are both 'mobile' and located in relation to cultural 'belongings' (Henderson et al 2007) and in my close analysis of each of the case studies presented in chapter six it is possible to see the complicated ways in which participants draw on these markers in making sense of their understandings and experiences of 'good sex'. Accounts such as Chanelle's provide particularly striking examples of how one young woman can draw on conflicting accounts of sexuality to create an identity for herself as a pansexual, Christian young woman and to re-imagine meanings of sex, pleasure and virginity in the process. Chanelle's account highlights both the creative and

queer possibilities of living as a 'poly-vocal' storyteller' (Weeks 2007) as well as the emotional costs of being, as Chanelle suggests, on in both sides of the *'fence'*.

Despite my desire to resist categorising participants' accounts according to gender and avoid the coupling of gender and sexuality in which debates about pleasure and desire seem to get so stuck (Segal 1994), I found myself writing about the young women in the clusters of 'virgins' and 'couples' together, with the young men (Michael and Oscar) presented as complementary but distinct examples of sexual experience. When writing about the sexual explorers however I was struck by the sameness of the accounts across gender and sexual differences, suggesting that this account of sexual experience, unlike narratives of virginity and partner relationships, is less securely tied to heterosexual gender categories. There was no talk from the sexual explorers about female sexual agency making a woman 'feel like a man', as Kat and Beyonce suggested, or suggestions that young men's sexual experience is more highly valued than young women's, as Ruby suggested in her account. James, Indiah and Sarah's accounts of their heterosexual relationships (unlike their casual and bisexual experiences) were all suggestive however of enduring and frustrating gender arrangements although there was no language for understanding the barriers to sexual experimentation beyond the 'makeover' narrative that understands 'bad sex' in terms of lack of effort and entrepreneurial spirit (Harvey and Gill 2011b). This discourse of sexual experimentation and entrepreneurialism seemed to enable participants to imagine pleasure in more diverse and potentially more equitable ways, but as noted in relation to both the queer focus group and the explorers' interview accounts, it also closed down spaces for realising the talk about vulnerability, loss, frustration and unfairness that emerged in other accounts.

Young people's understandings of 'good sex'; timeliness and reciprocity

In chapter four I suggested that questions asked by survey participants about 'pleasure' provided insight into their expectations about what counts as 'good sex' whilst also highlighting areas of sexual experience that may be problematic, concerning or confusing. Questions focused on the frequency and duration of sex, how to pleasure your partner, how to have a continually pleasurable and improving sex life, how to achieve female orgasm (quickly) during penetrative sex and the pleasure/pain of first sex (see chapter four). Analyses of the focus group and interview data provides further insight into these contested areas and suggests that there are a key set of concerns related to the timing and timeliness of sex and the reciprocity of sexual pleasure.

In the sexually 'inexperienced' focus group and in the accounts of the virgins and sexual beginners these concerns centre on *when* in the course of a lifetime and a relationship timeline a young person should first have sex. In these accounts participants mapped out moral landscapes of timeliness and respectability that were implicitly or explicitly gendered and classed (Skeggs 1997, 2004) and that painted a picture of teenage sexual relationships as risky, potentially abusive and *'95% bad'* (Jessica). In these accounts biographical time and relationship time emerge as a ways of giving value and meaning to otherwise 'fleeting' erotic moments (Bauman 1998) so that when the frame is moved from coupled to causal sex or from the sexual future of an adult to that of a child, the risks of sex amplify to include not just unwanted pregnancies and STIs, but the dangers of rushing and untimely sex (Thomson 2000a).

The accounts of more sexually experienced participants suggest that concerns

about sexual timing centre on the *duration* of a sexual encounter and for those in couple relationships on the *frequency* of the sexual encounter. For Wallay and the young men in focus group three these concerns centred on the number of *'minutes'* that a man can perform and the potential reaction from their female evaluators who may ridicule their performance or label them as *'selfish'*. For interview participants in couple relationships these concerns centred largely on how to negotiate having less sex than they currently are. As Vinnie and Beyonce state, they *'don't mind'* having sex but not *'every day'* (Vinnie) - *'Monday, Tuesday ....Friday ... Saturday, it's ridiculous!'* (Beyonce).

In each of the focus groups and interviews, participants suggested that sex *should* be enjoyable for both partners and in the survey data 40% of male and female respondents define 'good sex' as an explicitly shared or mutually enjoyable experience. At each stage of the research concerns about the absence of mutual pleasure in heterosexual relationships focused on the apparently complicated and tricky issue of female sexual pleasure and the challenges of achieving the *'holy grail'* of female orgasm during penetrative sex. Whilst female sexual pleasure was understood as complicated and mysterious, often described using rich metaphors and languages, accounts of male sexual pleasure were more limited and simplistic as it was frequently assumed, as Wallay suggests, *'as long as I buss I am fine.'*

In this way the data provide no evidence that female sexual pleasure is 'missing' from young people's sexual cultures and understandings of what counts as good, hetero-sex, yet the potential for it to be missing remains as an organiser of sexual experience. This is in contrast to male sexual pleasure, which is assumed as a constant presence. None of the participants suggested that 'it's a sin for women to enjoy sex' (Lees 1993: 30) or that female sexual pleasure is equated with being a

'slag', as young people in previous research have reported (Hirst 2004, Holland et al 1998). Even in focus group three in which disgust towards young women was visceral and strong, female sexual pleasure was sought after and desired. As Luke playfully suggested, the female orgasm is like the *'holy grail'*, the *'shinning light'* that provides evidence of a successful male performance (Braun et al 2003). The young men distinguish however between a 'wifey' (a girlfriend) and a 'slag' and suggest that *'if it's wifey, the man obviously gotta make her cum'*, but there is *'no need to take your time with some next bitch'*. In his interview James makes a similar distinction, although without expressing the same misogyny, stating, *'if it was a one-night stand, honestly it's... I don't really care. When it comes to, you know, relationships and fuck buddies, I do care because, you know, they're not there for my pleasure; they're there for their pleasure as well. And I think it's a good thing if people can reciprocate that pleasure'*.

In these and other accounts, time, pleasure and reciprocity emerge as ways of demonstrating care and value, of *'showing love'* (Oscar), or conversely, as a way of noting its absence. As Indiah states in focus group four, *'if it's got to the point where, like, I like you or something, I would actually want to please you and like wanna make you have good sex, otherwise I really don't care so I'll just lie there and flex my vagina muscles'*. For the three young women I interviewed who were in long-term heterosexual relationships at the time of the interview the challenge of reciprocal or mutually enjoyable sex centred not on questions of value and care but on how to negotiate the incompatibility of their own and their partners' sexual desires and skills. These accounts raise tricky questions about whether, as Moira Carmody suggests sex without mutual pleasure, labour and care for the other is unethical (Carmody 2009) or whether it is possible for sex to be mutually self-interested and ethical, mutually enjoyable and safe in heterosexual relationships?

Casual sexual relationships emerge from these accounts as particularly ethically murky spaces in which there is no requirement for either partner to reciprocate pleasure or care. As the data from focus groups two and three in particular demonstrate, casual sexual relationships are negotiated within an unequal and precarious moral landscape in which young school girls and jobless young women who have casual sex are being judged particularly harshly (Skeggs 1997, 2005).

In James' account the 'fuck-buddy' materialises as a distinct category that in which there is space for reciprocity without the challenges and frustrations of incompatibility that he and others experience in heterosexual couple relationships. As analysis of the interview accounts suggests, the couple relationship may be imagined as the ideal context for 'good sex' by the majority of participants at all three research stages, but it is frequently experienced as a space in which desires get stuck and sexual experimenters get bored and frustrated. For participants, the way out of the asymmetrical and frustrating scenario of the young heterosexual couple relationship is unclear, as differences between the couples and the explorers' accounts raise questions about whether the route to 'good sex' is through finding your equally experimental and competent sexual 'match' or whether the 'match' is created through practice, labour and emotional investment over time.

The data document a desire for reciprocity alongside evidence of enduring gender arrangements (Jamieson 1988, Braun et al 2003). Although understandings of what counts as 'good sex' may have shifted to include a requirement for mutual pleasure, understandings of normative femininities and masculinities continue to shape experience and the resources that young people have for making sense of these experiences. Kat for example wants to enjoy sex as much as her partner,

but her new role as sexual 'initiator' (Fine 1988) makes her *'feel with a man'*. In focus group two participants provide unanimous support for the ideals of gender equality and mutual pleasure, but struggle to imagine these ideals in the context of the lives of friends and peers without notable discomfort, awkwardness and concern.

The data from focus group two provide one example of how talk about sexual pleasure and reciprocity gets stuck (Ahmed 2004) in response to questions about gender equality as 'emotional blisters' (Wetherell 2012) seem to block the potential for imagining otherwise (Back 2007). My analysis suggests that when asked exploratory questions about sex and pleasure participants found alternative languages for talking about reciprocity, including languages of labour and entrepreneurialism, selfishness, fun, and, persistently, through using the language of time. In Vinnie and Beyonce's accounts for example, it is talk about the frequency of sex that creates spaces for exploring themes of mutuality and ambivalence, finding a language for the uncomfortable ethical territory of experiences that are between/both wanted and unwanted, good and bad sex (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005).

Possibilities for practice: revisiting the pleasure project

In concluding this thesis I have highlighted the diversity of young people's understandings of 'good sex', arguing that there are rich possibilities for engaging young people in conversations about this contested, emotional and moral topic. In this final section the focus of my discussion shifts from research to professional practices, using the insights from the research to revisit the debates outlined in chapter two and outline some possibilities for including sexual pleasure in sexual

health work with young people. In my discussion I initially consider the rationale for pleasure inclusion before moving on to consider possibilities for developing ideas about the feminist pleasure project, both in theory and in practice.

The rationale for pleasure: creating spaces for good, bad and ambivalent sex

Evidence of the diversity of meanings and resources for making sense of 'good sex' in young people's sexual cultures suggests that this is a rich area for research/practice; for exploring conflicting moral values, experiences of difference, inequality, loss, desire, exclusion, fear and pleasure. Analysis of the data suggests that whilst some of these meanings fit closely with accounts of 'good sex' framed in sexual health and education policy – delay, love, reciprocity, intimacy – others such as the pleasure of anonymous sex and the sharing of sexual partners may be more challenging to explore in the 'official' spaces of schools, clinics and other institutional environments.

The gap between young people's sexual cultures and the 'official' cultures of schools has been well documented and is identified as a key barrier to the provision of good, comprehensive sex education in schools (Fine 1988, Kehily 2002, Alldred and David 2007, Johnson 1996, Allen 2001). One of the rationales for including a discourse of desire, erotics or pleasure in school based sexuality education is that this would create opportunities to address this gap and provide young people with access to more realistic, embodied, and equitable discourses of gender and sexuality (Allen 2001, 2005a, Fine 1988, Beasley 2008).

My analyses suggest however that there is a discrepancy between the 'health-promoting' (UNESCO 2007) discourses of desire, pleasure and erotics set out in

the literature and the discourses generated by young people when asked to talk about their understandings and experiences of 'good sex'. Participants' debates about what counts as 'good' sex rarely included discussion of condom use and safer sex practices and although concepts of mutuality and reciprocity emerged as important to participants' understandings of 'good sex', this was not necessarily based on the relationships of gender equality and shared sexual agency, as set out in the feminist literature.

Evidence of this discrepancy is perhaps not surprising but raises questions about whether the function of the pleasure project is to challenge young people's accounts of 'good sex' and offer a more feminist or 'health-promoting' alternative or to create spaces, as I did as a researcher, or to give voice to a range of sexual meanings and experiences and allow young people to *find their own way'* (Jessica focus group two).

When I asked young people in three of the focus groups for their views on the potential inclusion of pleasure in sexual health and education services they were largely supportive of the idea, arguing that there is currently too much emphasis on the negative consequences of sex and that since pleasure is a natural part of having sex its discussion in education *'should be encouraged'* (Jasmine, focus group two). There was a tension in these group discussions however between the desire for knowledge, advice and answers to questions about sex and pleasure - *'I got this girl, I need to go this...'* (Wallay) - and a suspicion towards authoritative accounts of 'good sex' that pass *'personal opinion'* off as *'fact'* or that transform sex education sessions into *'sex workshops'* giving practical demonstrations and sex tips.

I think they should let people ask questions, don't teach. Don't come here and be like 'yeah, yeah, yeah'. Ask questions, like let them, like the questions that they have. Answer them.'

In focus group two Jessica and Jasmine emphasised the importance of providing young people with diverse accounts of sexual pleasure rather than giving them an *'actual answer, like fact'*. As Jessica states, *'the important thing to know is that there is more than one route. Like you can't say to them, this is exactly how to do it. But you can say to them, you can do it like this, or like this or like this and then you can find your own way of doing it, but that they are aware that there's different ways to do it.'*

Evidence from the research suggests that a 'top down' approach to how 'to do' pleasure would likely be met with protest and resistance from young people (Watney 1990, Britzman 1998) and further that it would not be possible to implement in practice, since as researcher/practitioners we cannot know in advance what will happen when we open up spaces to explore 'good sex' and sexual pleasure (Allen and Carmody 2012).

A key rationale for the inclusion of a discourse of desire, erotics or pleasure in school based sexuality education is that it would create spaces for young people to explore different ways *'of doing'* sexual and gender identity, understanding and experiencing sexual pleasure and desire. The literature suggests that this would primarily be achieved through creating opportunities for young people to unravel the limited gendered discourses of sexuality that 'tag' (female) pleasure with negative moral and health consequences (Fine 1988) and explore alternative, more empowering *'routes'* to 'good sex' and sexual pleasure (Allen 2005a, Kiely

2005, Beasley 2008).

Whilst the data provide ample evidence of young people's enthusiasm for exploring new ideas and the desire to explore and unravel the strings that keep ideals of 'good sex' in place (Bauman 2003), they also document the anxiety and discomfort in doing so. Conversations about pleasure are indeed 'sites of possibility' (Allen and Carmody 20120) where there is potential for play, fun, critical and queer thinking, new and exciting identities and ideas, but there is also the potential for discomfort, disgust, ambivalence and the nostalgic desires for return. Whilst this does not therefore suggest that the 'pleasure project' is not possible, it does suggest that the project of un-tagging and queering pleasure as a route to personal and social change (Fine 1988, Carmody and Allen 2012) requires a side project; one that accounts for the contested, emotive and potentially unbearable experience of being asked to unravel the strings and ballasts around what you know (and don't want to know) about 'good', 'bad' and ambivalent sex (Britzman 1998).

Although focus group participants were enthusiastic about including discussion of sexual pleasure in sexual health work with young people, they emphasised the importance of young people having the opportunity to talk about the *negative* emotions related to sex; the feelings of disappointment, confusion and regret that Wallay characterises as the *'emotional garbage'* of sex. Participants in all three focus groups that took part in the second group activity (see chapter 3 and appendix G) were fascinated by the questions – 'is it usual to get depressed after sex?' and 'if you are fed up of sex what's next?' – stating that it was unusual or unheard of to hear people talk about not enjoying sex. As Jessica states – *'people*

say that they enjoy sex more, even if they are lying, just 'cos everyone else does it, so they say it.'

Jessica's comments seem to refer to the account of 'great sex' that Laura Harvey and Ros Gill (2011a, 2011b) capture in their analyses of the contemporary reality television programme *The Sex Inspectors* that is reflected in the accounts of the sexual explorers and the young women in focus group four. In these accounts 'bad sex' and sexual failure are not an option as sex can always be 'made over' through hard work, skill and an entrepreneurial spirit (Harvey and Gill 2011); there is, as the young women in focus group four suggest, always a 'second round', a new position, a different location, a new partner or a new toy. As Rochelle states, '*I don't think you could ever get fed up of sex, but maybe the kind of sex that you having.*'

Analyses of the focus group and interview data suggest that this account is contested and that possibilities of talking openly about sex, pleasure and desire, and for putting these desires into practice, can be limited, shaped by participants' evolving sexual biographies and embodied 'learning by doing' (Allen 2005a) as well as by ongoing gender, class, race, age and sexual power relations. Jessica's comments above that people always say they enjoy sex are contradicted by her discussion with me in the interview about her lack of access to 'positive' stories about teenage sexual experience and her doubt that her own future sexual experiences could be pleasurable.

As previously noted, binary concepts such as good/bad, wanted/unwanted, were not useful for participants (or for me as a researcher) in making sense of the complex range of emotions that young people reported experiencing before,

during and after a sexual encounter (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005). This suggests, as Michelle Fine (1988) argues, that opening up spaces to explore issues of pleasure and desire with young people means addressing 'what feels good *and* bad, desirable *and* undesirable, grounded in experience, needs and limits' (1988: 33, my emphasis).

As discussed in chapter two, Fine's article speaks to a historically situated 'politics of pleasure' (Segal 1994) concerned with balancing women's rights to enjoy sexual pleasure with concerns about the disproportionate risks that women face in having sex with men. Conducted three decades later, this research seems to speak to a different politics of pleasure in which participants suggest there are ample opportunities for men and women to talk about 'good sex' but limited spaces to explore the *'emotional garbage'* involved in the pursuit of sexual pleasure.

This material highlights the potential to engage young people in work around the emotional and contested areas of 'good sex' documented in the research but it also presents challenges for safer sex campaigns and sexual health education programmes that aim to 'be sex-positive' or to 'eroticise' the contraceptive products that they promote (Philpott et al 2006), documenting both the value of access to 'positive' stories of sexuality as well as the ways in which 'positive' languages of fun, adventure and pleasure can close down opportunities for exploring experiences of vulnerability, fear and disgust.

Revisiting the feminist pleasure project: possibilities for theory and practice

Outlining a participatory and 'pragmatist' approach to community health work, Melissa Nolas (forthcoming 2014) makes the distinction between the 'utopian maps' for better ways of living or being such as Paulo Freire's popular and influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), and the 'terrain' of hard work, skill and creativity that constitutes the praxis of personal and social change through engagement with youth and community projects. Nolas argues that this complex and emergent 'terrain' of social change requires a different kind of narrative from the 'utopian map' – one that is reflexive and that focuses on lived experience.

As noted below, the research suggests that there is a discrepancy between the 'utopian maps' for personal and political change set out in the feminist literature calling for the inclusion of discourses of desire, erotics and pleasure in sexuality education and the discourses generated in conversation with young people about 'good sex' and sexual pleasure. In highlighting this 'gap' my argument is not that such maps are redundant but rather that they provide the 'direction of travel' (Nolas, forthcoming 2014) as opposed to an account of the terrain of 'doing' pleasure work with young people.

Based on my research I would not argue that evidence of this 'gap' suggests that we need to imagine a new 'map', discourse of desire or erotics but rather that we need to consider how these maps and discourses might be realized through youth, education and health practices in different institutional spaces. This is both a theoretical argument about the tools required to understand what it means for researcher/practitioners to engage with young people on sexual pleasure, and a methodological argument suggesting that the way forwards for

researcher/practitioners is to explore ways of 'doing' this work, using critical reflexivity to interrogate how different resources and activities can be realized in different local and institutional contexts.

As outlined in chapter three, feminist researchers and activists have been key proponents of the youth sexuality pleasure project, arguing for the personally and socially transformative potential of engaging young women in critical, feminist sexuality education. Michelle Fine (1988) for example argues that introducing a 'discourse of desire' into the 'official' school curriculum would create spaces for young women to explore their embodied desires, good and bad sexual experiences and in doing so would 'release females from a position of receptivity, enable an analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure, and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators' (Fine 1988: 33).

My analysis of young people's understandings and experiences of 'good sex', as documented above, suggest that the female 'initiator' and 'negotiator' is a desired but contradictory figure that young women struggle to put into practice (Gill 2009, McRobbie 2007, 2009). Kat's account for example suggests that in her current relationship her boyfriend's lack of sexual experience and sexual passivity means that she is required to adopt the role of 'initiator' but that rather than enjoying her new found gender role, she is frustrated, angry and uncomfortable. For Kat, being 'released from a position of receptivity' is (at least at this stage in her life and relationship) a barrier, rather than an enabler of 'good sex'.

An account such as Kat's could be read as evidence of the need for a feminist education for young women in order to challenge limited understandings of gender

and sexual agency and provide opportunities to explore some of the possibilities and contradictions for young women in trying to be both 'feminine' and a sexual' initiator'. Her account also highlights however some of the limitations of the post-structuralist approaches adopted by proponents of the feminist pleasure project for explaining young people's affective experiences and meaning making processes and for imagining how new meanings might be generated in practice settings and educational encounters. As Wetherell (2012) argues, in order to understand these meaning-making processes we need an account of how 'big discourse' intertwines with the patterns of everyday dynamic and immediate discursive-affective practice.

Throughout this thesis I have aimed to provide this account of 'method-in-practice' (Thomson 2011), describing and situating the discourses of sex, pleasure and desire that were generated using different research methods.

A finding from adopting this reflexive, situated approach is that what it is possible to say about 'good sex' and sexual pleasure will depend on the research methods and practices used and the context within which the interaction takes place. The research suggests that in asking young people to talk about sexual pleasure or critique accounts of 'good sex' we cannot know what will happen in advance (Allen and Carmody 2012). My experiences of conducting group work in particular suggests that inviting young people to talk about sexual pleasure, sets in motion what Wetherell (2012) describes as 'spiraling discursive affect loops', a pattern of unpredictable discursive-affective practices that are mobilized as initial affect is 'narrated, communicated, shared, intensified, dispersed, modified and sometimes re-awoken decades later' (Wetherell 2011: 53).

Evidence of dynamic practices of meaning-making suggest as Allen and Carmody (2012) have argued that conversations about sexual pleasure with young people are indeed 'sites for possibility'; they are potentially transformative sites of enquiry in which young people can engage in interactive discursive-affective practices, possibilities for imagining otherwise (Back 2007). For practitioners engaging in this work this suggests that 'pleasure' is not the crystallized body of knowledge (Smith 1987) that young people fear might be put in a *manual'* (nor the missing discourse that cannot be spoken) but something that can be known and brought into being through conversation and interaction between, and with, young people.

As the research documents however, each of these interactions is situated within local and wider social contexts that limit what it is possible to realise within a particular encounter and what can be 're-awoken decades later' (Wetherell 2012). A disruptive episode or cathartic moment may be potentially transformative but it is also situated within the relations of power that operate in and between different sexual communities and social groups (Johnson 1996). For practitioners, (unlike perhaps for researchers) these situated practices are embedded within the cultural formations of institutions that shape possibilities for practice.

In focus group three for example I noted the tension between my comments and questions to young men in the group and those of the youth worker and the sexual health outreach worker. Whilst I aimed to challenge the young men by asking probing or critical questions, I did not attempt to educate the young men or provide them with alternative accounts of 'good sex', as Graham and Steven did. The privilege of being a researcher in these discussions was that I was free to occupy a 'third space', with no professional responsibility for the moral education of these young men or for their sexual health outcomes (Gillies and Robinson 2010).

For practitioners working in schools there may be further limitations to possibilities for engaging in this work. In the current policy context in England and Wales for example, schools are required to teach pupils the benefits of delaying sex and of having sex in loving and healthy relationships (DfEE 2000). Within this policy context the function of sex education is not to create open 'sites for possibility' (Allen and Carmody 2012) in which young people find their 'own way of doing it' (Jessica) but to guide young people to follow a particular timely, moral path.

Margaret Wetherell (2012) argues, 'situated affective practice requires formative background conditions that are social, material and spatial as well as physiological and phenomenological; it demands collectives who recognise, endorse and pass on the affective practice' (ibid.. 79). This suggests in order to put the 'pleasure project' into practice in different institutional settings, intervention is also required at the level of socio-political campaigning as well as at the level of professional practice. In a climate of 'austerity', cuts to youth services, increased pressures on the secondary education system and the rise in conservative agendas around abortion and sex education it seems increasingly important to both offer an alternative proactive and positive agenda around youth sexuality education and to consider how limited resources can be used and 'scaled up' most effectively (Askins and Paine 2011).

(Im)possibilities for practice: reflections from the field

During fieldwork I met a few practitioners who were delivering sessions on sexual pleasure as part of sex education outreach programmes in FE colleges, youth centres and groups for teenage parents. These sessions included activities such

as pleasure body mapping in which young people had to draw round a person and then map different erogenous zones on to the silhouette and identify places that people enjoy being touched. Another popular session was the senses activity that involved having a 'basket' of sensory objects such as candles, feathers and chocolate and asking young people to consider how these objects could be used to stimulate the different senses and give a partner pleasure, without having penetrative sex. This was frequently delivered as part of delay programmes that emphasise that young people can enjoy having sensual and sexual experiences without having penetrative sex.

These approaches provided opportunities for young people to consider the potential for pleasure in their own and their partners' bodies and to develop languages for talking about intimacy, touch and embodied sensation. They did not however always provide scope for dealing with some of the more challenging aspects of pleasure such as those documented in the research such as the complexities of negotiating gendered moral landscapes of timeliness and respectability and the fantasy/ fear of penetrative sex. As Chanelle states, knowing and naming your *erogenous zones'* is only one step in a series of technical and emotional practices involved in the giving and receiving of pleasure in young and inexperienced relationships.

> I know my erogenous zones and stuff like that, but I sometimes feel a bit embarrassed. Yeah I think a lot of the time I feel pretty embarrassed by things. […] I guess I don't really know what gives me pleasure, I haven't had that many sexual experiences kind of thing, I haven't had sex with that many girls or that many times with a girl. I guess I don't really know. (Chanelle)

I would argue that the ideal space to engage young people in the more challenging areas of work around sexual pleasure would be the kind of 'safe spaces' described by youth researcher Kendra Urdang (see above); spaces that were co-created between young people and researcher/practitioners over time in which young people felt able to re-evaluate their 'comfort zones, be them political, social, or poetic' (Torre et al 2008: 26). It seems unlikely however that this kind of creative and longitudinal work would be possible within already squeezed PSHE curriculums and the 'cerebral' space of the school classroom (Alldred and David 2007), suggesting that possibilities for creating these kinds of 'safe spaces' will depend on locally available resources, institutional and policy contexts. Arguably there may be more potential for this work in sites that are peripatetic to schools, such as those created through collaborative research projects (i.e. Torre et al 2008, Gilies and Robinson 2010) or through the work of voluntary sector organisations that deliver outreach sexual health and education sessions in the kinds of settings that I observed during fieldwork. As the outreach worker who participated in focus group three observed, in the context of a six week outreach programme at a local youth centre he had been able to deliver a number of sessions on sexual pleasure at the young men's request, but he would not advise, or think it possible, to conduct the this work and focus group activity that we co-facilitated in a school environment.

As argued in chapter two, there are increasing suggestions in the literature that schools may not be the most appropriate environment to deliver critical feminist sex education and that there may be more possibilities for creative and critical work in online communities or in informal and community education environments (Fine 2005, Harris 2005). My observations of institutional and professional practices during stage one of the research and my experiences of conducting

group work with young people suggests that these concerns are well founded and that including pleasure in regulatory institutional contexts has the potential to create new norms and pressures, new exclusions and inequalities (Shoveller 2011a, 2011b, Allen and Carmody 2012). I would not therefore suggest that engaging young people in work around sexual pleasure is *im*possible, but rather that what is possible will depend on local and wider socio-political contexts.

During the first year of my doctoral study I attended a training course on young people and sexual pleasure run for practitioners by the Sheffield Centre for HIV and Sexual Health. The two-day course was attended by practitioners working in a range of institutional settings many of whom commented that the best way they could imagine including pleasure in their work would be through adopting what was referred to as a 'drip-drip' approach. This approach involved including pleasure within existing education sessions, health consultations and information resources, without changing the overall format of the intervention or resource. An example of this might be including discussion of pleasure in existing education sessions on contraception through talking about how different forms of contraception may impact on experiences of sexual pleasure or through including information about bodily arousal and response in sexual health handouts and physiological diagrams. As one attendee noted, if she included a session entitled 'pleasure' in the SRE programme then school governors would object, but if she incorporated it into existing sessions of 'contraception' and 'consent' then she would be unlikely to be met with opposition.

The body of public health literature outlined in chapter two provides further examples of this approach, including 'pleasure profiling' in family planning interventions (Higgins and Hirsch 2007), including erotic images in safer sex and

HIV campaign materials and information leaflets (Scott-Sheldon and Johnson 2006, Knerr 2008) and adjusting the learning outcomes in school based SRE programmes to include knowledge and efficacy around diverse sexual practices (Ingham 2005). These accounts point to the ways in which pleasure can be included in highly conservative and regulatory environments in which practitioners may not have institutional support for their 'pleasure project'.

Conclusion: Should pleasure be included in sexual health and education work with young people?

I started my PhD journey convinced by the arguments for including the 'missing discourse of desire' in sex education and sexual health agendas. I found the critique of existing sexual health and education frameworks convincing and welcomed the commitment to gender equality, social justice and youth empowerment that seemed to lie at the heart of this agenda. Despite my enthusiasm for the 'pleasure project' I felt that there was a lack of clarity in the literature about what constitutes 'pleasure, 'erotics' and 'desire' both in the context of young people's everyday lives and relationships but also in the context of school classrooms, sexual health clinics and educational outreach sessions in youth clubs and children's centres.

I felt uneasy about the three-stage discursive journey that I felt authors such as Michelle Fine and Louisa Allen seemed to be making from (1) an analysis of young people's talk about their sexual practices and relationships, (2) to an analysis of gendered power relations and (3) on to constructing a rationale for the transformative potential of a discourse of pleasure / desire / erotics in sexuality education in schools. Work that has emerged over the course of my doctoral

studies has started to address some of the limitations of the missing / included discourse theory and consider alternative ways forward for the feminist sexuality education pleasure project (Allen and Carmody 2012, Lamb 2012, Tolman 2012). Whilst these critical contributions are useful I remain uncomfortable about the way radical theoretical ideas are transported into educational contexts without sufficient attention to the messy terrain of youth work practices and the emotional terrain of uncertainty, risk and vulnerability involved in un-tagging and challenging that which you already know (Britzman 1998).

One of the aims of this thesis has been to provide a reflexive account of how the 'feminist ideals' (Lamb 2012) and "utopian maps' of the pleasure project play out in different research contexts – situated within different social, institutional and interactive settings. In doing so I have hoped to render visible some of the technical, emotional and ethical graft (Nolas, forthcoming 2014) involved in 'giving voice' to young people's understandings and experiences of 'good sex' and sexual pleasure and to highlight the value of critical reflexivity for delivering ethical practice within this contested terrain.

In this way the focus of this thesis has not been on ascertaining whether of not the discourse of desire is 'missing' from sex education curricula and materials or from young people's talk about their sexual relationships and values, but rather as Sara McClelland and Michelle Fine (2008) suggest, on exploring the methodological possibilities for mobilising and listening to discourses of desire and findings methods of analysis that hold back the 'cultural brakes' that close these discourses down.

Whilst conducting fieldwork and analysing the data I encountered multiple possibilities and impossibilities for engaging young people in conversations about pleasure. In groups and one-to-one settings I found that inviting young people to talk about pleasure provided opportunities for critical conversation and catharsis, for developing new insights, telling stories, having fun and exploring some of the emotional contradictions that 'stick' to discourses of sex, pleasure and desire (Ahmed 2004). My analyses also indicated however that in each context particular accounts of 'good sex' accrued value, often leading to the silencing or rejection of alternative accounts. This was particularly visible in group settings; although there were always slippages in the dominant account – for example in focus group three when talk about the pleasures of the 'quick beat' and expressions of disgust towards female sexuality paused for participants to consider how to create an erotic moment for female sexual pleasure – these were usually quickly closed down by a dominant group member with any discomfort masked by a new joke, sexual story or a new hyperbolic expression of disgust.

Evidence of the regulatory context of the peer group, the institution and the national policy context suggests that there are limitations to creating the kind of ideal 'safe spaces' set out in the literature but I would suggest that there are still possibilities for delivering the pleasure project and engaging young people in critical and positive work around gender and sexuality, even within conservative and constraining settings. Whilst 'dripping' pleasure into often highly restrictive settings may be an unsatisfactory recommendation when compared to the radical potential of pleasure as a queer site of endless possibility, I would suggest that this approach is maybe the only ethical possibility in settings where it is not possible to create the kinds of safe spaces required to mine the emotive and political terrain of

what feels good and bad, un-tagging pleasure from its routine 'strings' and 'ballasts' (Bauman 2003). As Zygmunt Bauman argues:

> It's alright perhaps even exhilarating and altogether wonderful, for sex to be so liberated. The snag is how to hold it in place once the ballast has been thrown overboard; how to hold it in shape if frames are no longer available. Flying lightly is mirth, rudderless flying is Distress. Change is blissful, volatility annoying. The unbearable lightness of sex? (Bauman 2003: 46)

At the end of my doctoral journey I remain convinced by the critiques of dominant policy agendas around young people's sexual health and inspired by the argument for a more positive, inclusive and feminist sex education agenda that provides spaces for young people to explore 'what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable' (Fine 1988) and that offers safe spaces to critically explore diverse accounts of what counts as 'good' and 'bad' sex.

Whilst I was so often impressed by the examples of positive and critical sex education and youth work practice that I observed, I also met youth practitioners who objected to young people being given condoms because they shouldn't be having sex and others who said that they would not feel comfortable talking about sex with a young person at all; these observations highlight the continuing importance of providing a rationale for this work and creating opportunities for staff training and development. Similarly whilst I was amazed by how articulate, self-aware and determined some young people were about their sexual desires and experiences, I was also shocked by the visceral misogyny and homophobia that others reported and expressed as well as being saddened by quieter stories of uncomfortable, confusing and lonely sexual encounters and desires. Whilst I was repeatedly told that 'sex should', as Michael stated, *be great before, during the*

sex and after', listening to participants' 'sexual stories' suggested that many were having an exciting yet challenging or confusing time getting there.

Shifts in the political climate surrounding young people's sexualities in the UK over the last four years suggest that it continues to be vital to make these critiques of dominant socio-political agendas around young people's sexualities and to offer young people access to critical, positive and creative 'safe spaces' to explore the multiple contradictions and 'major areas of contest' (Rubin 1984) that emerge in youth sexual cultures as the lines around 'good sex' continually shift and reconfigure. I would suggest however that in order to offer a robust alternative to these conservative agendas (see chapter one) the 'utopian maps' for future feminist pleasure projects for personal and political change must be grounded in the messy and often highly regulatory 'terrain' (Nolas, forthcoming 2014) of professional practice and located within the various institutional and policy contexts in which this work could be delivered.

The next step for me in this journey is to start an ESRC funded knowledge exchange project that will involve working in collaboration with Brook to explore creative and ethical ways of animating the data from this study for use in practice, working with groups of young people and education practitioners to generate audio-visual materials and training materials. There are three arms to this project that I would argue are indicative of the future directions to explore in this area of work: (1) participatory work with young people and a film maker exploring ways of reanimating the research data to communicate messages about young people's sexual lives and the value of sex positive cultures to different audiences, (2) working collaboratively with a group of education practitioners to develop training materials and activities that can be made publically available for practitioners

wanting to engage in this and (3) developing an accessible document that provides the rationale and evidence for conducting this work that can be made publically available for use by practitioners and organisations needing support in dealing with 'conservative parents' (Allen 2007b: 259) and enraged school governors. In conducting this work in collaboration with Brook I hope to draw on and contribute to their campaign work around challenging society's negative attitudes to sex and promoting a 'sex positive' culture, drawing on the insights from the research about the challenges of putting this into practice. I would suggest that it is these four levels of intervention that are required in order to take the pleasure project forward into practice – creative engagement with young people, training and support for practitioners, resourcing organisations and institutions to rationalise (and defend this work) and wider socio-political and media campaigning.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent form

Deciding if you want to take part

Research project title: 'Good Sex': Young people, sexual pleasure and sexual health services

Name of researcher: Ester McGeeney

I will ask you about your views and opinions on sex and relationships, in particular on the enjoyable and pleasurable things about sex.

OK ☐   Not OK ☐

The information that you give me is confidential. The only time I will talk to someone else about what you tell me is if I think you or someone you tell me about is in danger of being hurt.

OK ☐   Not OK ☐

I will make an audio recording of the interview so that I can listen to the interview again and write down what is said. I will use fake names when I write down what is said so that no-one will know who said what. I am the only person who will listen to this recording.

OK ☐   Not OK ☐

I might use or quote things that you have said in reports that I write about the research. If I do this I will use fake names so that no-one knows who said what.

OK ☐   Not OK ☐

If you want to take part in the research please sign below. By signing below you giving your consent to each of the statements that you ticked as *OK*.

If you have ticked *Not OK* in some of the boxes you may not be able to take part in all of the research. The researcher will discuss this with you.

Your name...

Signed...   Date ....

If you have any questions about this form please talk to the researcher who can be contacted at e.m.mcgeeney@open.ac.uk or 07940 400 881 or at the research facebook page: *Researching good sex.*

Research information sheet

Research project title: 'Good Sex': Young people, sexual pleasure and sexual health services

Who am I?
My name is Ester McGeeney and I am a PhD student doing a 3 year research project with The Open University and Brook.

What is the research about?
I am researching the views of young people in Islington on sex and relationships. I am looking at people's ideas about what is good and bad sex and where these ideas come from. I am interested in how these views can be used to change the way we think about young people's relationships and to improve services for young people.

Why should I take part in the research?
This research project aims to listen to young people's opinions and use these opinions to think about ways of improving sexual health and education services for young people. If you take part, you will be part of this process.

If I take part in the research, what will I be doing?
There are 3 parts to the research that you could take part in. You could take part in 1, 2 or all 3 stages.

Complete a *questionnaire*   10 – 15 minutes.
Take part in a *focus group*: this means talking about sex and relationships with other young people, me and an assistant researcher. 45 minutes - 1.5 hours.
Take part in an *interview*: this means talking about sex and relationships with me.
                                            30 minutes - 2 hours.
The length of the interview depends on how long you want to talk for. You can stop the interview at any time and I will not mind.

Are the focus groups and interviews formal?
No. I want to hear what you have to say so will ask some questions and throw out some ideas for you to discuss. In the focus groups we will do some group activities to get people talking. If you don't want to comment or answer a particular question you do not have to.

I have never had sex, can I take part?
Yes! I want to hear about your views and opinions about sex. You do not need to have had sex to have an opinion about it.

Will I get paid?
No, but as a way of saying thank you for taking part in a I will give you a £10 gift voucher for each interview or focus group that you take part in.

Is it confidential?
The information that you give me is confidential. This means that I will not tell your friends, parents, any staff or anyone else what you have said. The only time I

might want to talk to someone else about what you say is if I think that you are in danger of being hurt. If this happens I will talk to you about it first.

Will you record me?
I would like to record the interviews and focus groups so that I can listen to them again and write down everything that is said. When I write down what is said I will use fake names so that no-one can tell who said what. After I have written down what has been said I will delete the recordings.

Is it anonymous?
Yes. I will not ask you to put your names on the questionnaire. If you or someone else says your name in the interview or focus group I will change this when I write down what has been said using a fake name.

What happens after the research?
I will write about the research that I have done and will publish some of this and talk about what I have been doing so that other people can read about this research. I will use fake names at all times so that no-one will be able to link what has been said to you. If you want to see any of the work that I publish after the research or want to be involved in telling people about this research, tell me and I will send you more information.

I want to take part, what do I do now?
If you see me around, come and speak to me. Or get in touch – you can call, text or email me or go to the research facebook page which is called - *Researching Good Sex*. Remember if you post on my wall people can identify you so if you want to keep it anonymous send me a message instead. If you send me your details I will contact you to tell you more about the research and how you can take part. I will keep all your contact details secure and confidential. Remember not to post your contact details on my facebook wall where anyone and everyone can see them!

Ester McGeeney
07940 400 881
e.m.mcgeeney@open.ac.uk
Facebook : researching good sex

I want more information about this...

Contact me and I can talk to you about the research or can send you more information. Or you can look at the research facebook page – search for *Researching Good Sex*.

What if I say yes now and change my mind later about taking part?

You can change your mind about taking part in this research at any time, you do not have to give a reason why and I will delete any information that I have about you.

What if I want to make a complaint or have something I can't talk to you about?

If you have any problems, concerns or complaints as a result of this research you can contact the Director of Postgraduate Studies at The Open University using these details: Dr Lindsay O'Dell   l.odell@open.ac.uk   01908 859 067

Debrief

Thank you for taking part in my research!

Ester McGeeney
07940 400 881
e.m.mcgeeney@open.ac.uk
Facebook / researching good sex

What happens now?

I will listen to the recording of this interview / focus group and write down everything that was said today using fake names so that no-one can be identified. The information that you gave me today will be kept anonymous and confidential. There is more information about this on the Information Sheet that I gave you and on my facebook page. If you want another copy of the information sheet please ask me.

I will use the information that you have given me to report, present and publish the findings of this research. If you would like to see a summary of the research findings or get involved in the dissemination of the research please let me know.

What if I have some questions, comments or concerns?

At the end of this sheet I have listed some advice, information and support services that you can contact if you have questions, concerns or need support or information after taking part in this research.
If you have any questions, concerns or comments that you would like to ask me please get in touch. My contact details are at the top of the page and I would really like to hear any feedback that you have.

What if I want to make a complaint?

If you want to make a complaint please contact the Director of Postgraduate Studies at The Faculty of Health and Social Care at The Open University using these details:

Dr Lindsay O'Dell   l.odell@open.ac.uk
Director of Postgraduate Studies, The Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

What if I change my mind about taking part in the research?

You can change your mind about taking part in this research at any time and I will delete the information that you have given me. If you want to change your mind or have any concerns about the research that you want to talk about, please contact me.

What if I want more support, information and advice?

There are lots of organisations and websites that give information about sexual health, sex and relationships. Here are some that may be useful if you want more information or need support with any of the issues that we have talked about today.

Ask Brook   0808 802 1234   www.askbrook.org.uk   Text: 81222

Ask Brook provides free confidential information and advice about a range of sexual health issues and can give you details about your local and emergency services. The helpline is open 9.00am - 7.00pm, Monday to Friday and is free from all lines including mobiles. You can also text or ask a question on-line.

ChildLine   0800 1111   www.childline.org.uk

This is a confidential 24 hour helpline for young people under 18 to talk to someone about any issue. The ChildLine website contains a lot of information about a range of issues and also contains details of other ways of contacting ChildLine.

Get Connected   0808 808 4994   www.getconnected.org.uk

This is a free telephone and email helpline for under 25s that can give information about the services available to you and can connect you to any UK helpline where appropriate. There is also lots of information about local and national service you can use on their website.

London Lesbian & Gay Switchboard (LLGS)   020 7837 7324
          www.queery.org.uk

The LLGS helpline is open every day from 10am to 11pm and provides an information, support and referral service for lesbians, gay men, bisexual, trans people and anyone who needs to consider issues around their sexuality. The information website provides 24 hour access to our database of information and resources relevant to the LGBT community.

NSPCC helpline   0808 800 5000

This is a free confidential helpline for children in danger or distress, or for anyone who is worried about a child's safety or welfare. It is open every day, 24 hours a day.

The Site   www.thesite.org

TheSite.org provides advice and support for young people on a variety of topics including sex, relationships, health, wellbeing, drink, drugs, and lots more.

Appendix D: Research information sheet for practitioners

Research information sheet

Research project title: 'Good Sex': Young people, sexual pleasure and sexual health services

Name of researcher: Ester McGeeney

What is the research about?
This research will explore the views of young people and professionals on young people's sexual and intimate relationships. The focus of the research is on the positive, enjoyable and pleasurable aspects of young people's sexuality. This research is part of a 3 year PHD project with The Open University and Brook that I started in February 2009.

What's the point of the research?
Increasing our knowledge and understanding of young people's sexuality and the viewpoints that young people bring to sexual health services is important to ensure that these services are appropriate and effective.
I intend to use the collection and analysis of data to contribute towards current debates on young people's sexualities and on the inclusion of pleasure messages in sexual health work with young people. I also intend to use the findings and an evaluation of the methods used, to develop a research tool that could be used to replicate the proposed research in additional locations.

When and where is the research taking place?
I will be collecting research data for approximately 9 -12 months starting in March 2010. The research will take place in various locations within the London Borough of Islington.

What will I be doing?
Stage 1: I will be visiting services in Islington and distributing short questionnaires to professionals and young people. I will be looking at key policy documents, educational and health materials used by professionals in the local area.
Stage 2: I will conduct 4-5 focus groups and 10-20 interviews with young people.
Stage 3: I will conduct 5-10 interviews with professionals who work in youth and/or sexual health services.

Who do I want to take part in the research?
Young people aged 16-25 living, working, being educated or accessing services in Islington – including young men and young women from a range of ethnic backgrounds and with a range of sexual experiences.

Professionals working for young people's or sexual health services in the local area with ranging roles and responsibilities – including front line and management staff.

How do you know that this research is ethical and safe for young people?
I have received ethical approval for this research project from The Open University Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee. I have developed confidentiality, child protection and data protection procedures that have been approved by this ethics committee. I hold an enhanced CRB check dated 2009. I have over 5 years experience working as a practitioner and manager in young people's services, with experience in managing child protection issues and disclosures of sexual violence and abuse.

Is the research confidential and anonymous?
The information given to me by all participants is confidential and will only be shared with my supervisors, unless there is a legal requirement otherwise.
The anonymity of all participants will be protected. I will audio record all interviews and focus groups, the recordings will be transcribed and all names will be changed in the transcriptions so that all data is anonymous. If you are interviewed I will also change details of your job title, employer and place of work to ensure that you cannot be identified. Participants will not be asked to put their names on the questionnaires so that this data is also anonymous.

What will happen to the information that you give me after it has been collected?
The information you give to me will be used anonymously for educational and research purposes and will be disseminated and possibly published in reports, academic journals, presentations, conferences and in my PhD thesis. If you would like to be involved in the dissemination of my research findings or would like to see a copy of the findings please let me know.

What do I need from professionals working in Islington?
1. To volunteer to participate in the research either through completing a questionnaire or agreeing to take part in an interview later on.
2. To support me with recruiting young people to take part in the research. This could involve giving me access to local centres / peripatetic sites to meet young people and talk about my research and distribute questionnaires.
3. To facilitate my access to relevant educational materials used with young people, access to relevant policy documents and training materials used by professionals.

Why take part in the research?
You will have the opportunity to reflect on your practice, personal and professional experiences, to share good practice, resources and ideas. Your opinions and experiences will be used to map good practice and resources relating to the provision of positive, holistic sexual health service delivery. This data, along with data relating to the views, needs and experiences of service users will be used to contribute towards debates on best policy and practice in this area.

If you take part in the research, what will you be doing?
There are 2 parts to the research that you could take part in. You could take part in 1 or both parts.
  1. Complete a *questionnaire*. You can do this electronically or on paper. It should take about 20 minutes. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to.
  2. Take part in an *interview*. I would ask you about your personal and professional views relating to young people, sex and relationships. The

focus will be on your views on 'good sex', young people's sexual cultures and the inclusion of pleasure message in sexual health work with young people. I will also ask you about the resources that you use in your work and the training that you have received. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. The length of the interview depends on how long you want to talk for and how much time you have available. It will probably be between 45minutes and 2 hours. The interview would be held on a day, time and location that is convenient for you.

What if you agree to take part and change your mind later about taking part?

You can change your mind about taking part in this research at any time. You do not have to give a reason why and I would delete any data that I have collected about you.

What if you want to make a complaint or have concerns that you cannot discuss with me?

If you have any problems, concerns or complaints as a result of this research you can contact the Director of Postgraduate Studies in The Faculty of Health and Social Care at The Open University using the details below.

Dr Lindsay O'Dell l.odell@open.ac.uk   01908 859 067

Director of Postgraduate Studies, The Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

You want to take part, what do you do now?
Contact me using the details below if you want to take part or would like more information about the research and what it involves.

Ester McGeeney
07940 400 881
e.m.mcgeeney@open.ac.uk
The Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA
Facebook: Researching Good Sex

Appendix E: Questionnaire (Young people)

The Open University

Questionnaire: Young people, sex and the media

This is a short questionnaire that asks questions about you, the media that you use in general and your views about sex.

To take part in this research you must be aged 16 or over, and live, work or study in Islington.

This questionnaire is anonymous and the information collected will be treated confidentially. The results from this questionnaire will be seen by other people but in such a way that it will not be possible to tell who gave which answers or comments.

You

1. How old are you?

2. Are you:
    Female ☐   Male ☐   Other ☐

3. What do you consider to be your sexuality?

Bisexual	☐	Other ☐
Gay / lesbian	☐	Don't know ☐
Straight (heterosexual)	☐	

4. Are you:
    (Please tick the one box that best describes your ethnicity)

Asian	☐	White British / European ☐
Black African	☐	Mixed ☐
Black Caribbean	☐	Other ☐

5. How would *you* describe your ethnicity (background)?

6. Do you consider yourself to be religious?

Yes -	Buddhist ☐	No ☐	
	Christian ☐	Maybe ☐	
	Hindu ☐		
	Jewish ☐		
	Muslim ☐		
	Sikh ☐		
	Other ☐		

7. Where were you born? (Please write the city/town and country)

8. Where do you live now? (Please give the first half of your postcode? i.e. N1, EC1, N5) *Your home address cannot be identified from this.*

9. What are you doing at the moment?

Studying
Working
Full-time parent / carer
Other

If you are working or studying please say where.
(Please write the name of the college / school / employer)

10. Do you have any children?

No
Yes   If yes, how many?

11. Are you in a romantic or sexual relationship at the moment?

No
Yes   If yes, how long have you been in this relationship?

12. Do you think of yourself as sexually active at the moment?

Yes
No – I never have been
No – but I was in the past

13. How sexually experienced do you consider yourself to be?

1   10

Put a cross on the line from 1-10. 1 means that you think that you have very little sexual experience. 10 means that in your opinion you have a lot of sexual experience.

14. Have you ever visited your GP or a sexual health clinic for sexual health information, advice or testing?

Sexual health clinic   Yes   ☐   No - never   ☐

GP   Yes   ☐   No – never   ☐

The media and you

15. What media are you watching, listening to or using at the moment?
Think about the last book you read, the last film or TV programme you watched, the last clip you saw on YouTube, game you played or the last track that that you listened to. Please list some **specific** examples below.

Sex and your views

16. Please give your views of what sex is or should be like and complete the following sentences:

Good Sex is.....

Bad Sex is........

17. What kind of things do you think have influenced your views of what sex is or should be like?

18. If you wanted to understand more about what sex is like how would you find this out?

19. If you had the chance to ask one confidential question to a sex and relationships 'expert' what would it be?

20. What are you most looking forward to about your future sex and relationship experiences?

21. What worries do you have about future sex and relationship experiences?

22. If / when you have children, what messages about sex and relationships would you want them to learn?

You have finished! Thanks for taking your time to fill in this questionnaire.

Would you be interested in taking part in a focus group or an interview about your views on sex and relationships?

1-2 hours of your time? A £10 voucher? The chance to have your views heard?
If yes, please fill in your details on the next sheet.

Would you like to take part in a focus group or interview?

I am looking for young people to take part in group and individual interviews. The interviews would be in Islington, would last about 1-2 hours and would be about young people, sex and relationships. You would be given a £10 voucher for each interview to say thank you for taking part.

If you are interested in taking part please fill in your name and a way of contacting you on the next page. **Your contact information will be kept separately from this questionnaire so that all your answers remain anonymous.**

If you do not want to take part you do NOT have to put your details below.

☑ Yes I would like more information about taking part in this research

Your name ....

Your contact number or email ....

Any questions, worries or comments?

If you have any questions about this research or want to talk to me about any of the issues in this questionnaire please ask me now or get in touch using these contact details.

My name: **Ester McGeeney**

Call or text: **07940 400 881**

Email: **e.m.mcgeeney@open.ac.uk**

Facebook: **Researching Good Sex**

Appendix F: Questionnaire (Practitioners)

ID....................

Questionnaire: Young people and sexual health

This is a short questionnaire that asks about your professional role, your views on sexual health services, young people and sexual pleasure. It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. All of your answers will be anonymous and confidential.

The only criteria for taking part is that you work for an organisation that provides a service for young people who live, work or study in Islington.

Your role

1. What is your job role?

2. As part of your job role do you have direct contact with young people?

Yes ☐   No ☐   Other ☐ ....

3. What percentage of your work is concerned with sexual health? (From 0-100%)

Your views: Sexual Health Services

4. Please list the most effective sexual health services or initiatives that you know of for young people who live, work or study in Islington.

Your views: Young People

5. In your opinion, what groups of young people in Islington do sexual health services need to target?

6. What concerns do you have about the sexual health of the young people that you work with?

7. What makes you feel positive / reassured about the sexual health of the young people that you work with?

Your views: Sexual pleasure

8. How would you define sexual pleasure?

9. Do you think that discussion of sexual pleasure should be included in sexual health work with young people?

Yes ☐   No ☐   Not sure ☐

10. What benefits would there be to including discussion of sexual pleasure in sexual health work with young people?

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11. What concerns would you have about including sexual pleasure in sexual health work with young people?

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12. What resources are you aware of that can be used to work with young people to address the fun, enjoyable and pleasurable aspects of sex?

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13. Have you had any training on how to address the fun, enjoyable and pleasurable aspects of sex with young people?

Yes ☐   No ☐

Appendix G: Focus group activities

Example of statements used in focus group discussion activity 1:
(with thanks to Brook and Egg Research and Consultancy for use of quotations
from unpublished research, see Brook 2011)

If yes, please give any details of the name, content and provider of this training that you remember.

You have finished. Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

ID:..................

Would you be interested in taking part in an interview?

Over the next 10 months I would like to interview professionals who work in youth or sexual health services. The interview would take approximately one hour and would focus on your views on sex, your views on young people's sexual relationships and on current and future approaches to sexual health services for young people.

If you would like to take part in an interview please write your details below and I will contact you. **Your contact details will be stored separately from your questionnaire answers so that all answers given on this questionnaire remain anonymous.** Alternatively if you do not want to provide your contact details please contact the researcher using the details given below.

☑ Yes I would like more information about taking part in this research

Your name   ....

Your contact number or email ....

Any questions or comments?

This questionnaire is part of a research project that entitled 'Good sex, young people, sexual pleasure and sexual health services'. If you would like more information about this research or have any questions, comments or feedback on this questionnaire please use the details below to contact me.

Ester McGeeney   07940 400 881

Appendix G: Focus group activities

Example of statements used in focus group discussion activity 1:
(with thanks to Brook and Egg Research and Consultancy for use of quotations from unpublished research. See Brook 2008)

- Good sex is when you are really relaxed and you can be yourself. It doesn't matter what happens or what sounds you make. It's okay.

- It's when there's nothing awkward about it and you're really comfortable with each other

- For me good sex has to last long...If he's getting pleasure and he stops and I'm there and I ain't got my pleasure yet – I'm like 'you're selfish.

- He's got to know what he's doing and be confident. If he keeps asking 'is that ok? Is that ok? , 'should I do this' you don't want to know that. Males dominate, you want them to know what they're doing.

- I like the communication part because for both of you to achieve good sex, you've got to be able to say what you like and don't like. If they do something to you and you don't like it, you have to be comfortable enough to say 'Can you change that please?

- A: Good sex is safe sex
  B: No, no. I prefer it without a condom. I just feel without a condom it feels better. Males, London

- Girls get more emotionally attached to sex because it's letting someone inside your body. But I think it's just a pleasure feeling for boys. They don't really care as long as they've got the feeling.

Examples of statements used in focus group discussion activity 2:

- 'Why can't I have an orgasm?'

- 'Is it usual to feel depressed after sex?'

- 'Is it meant to hurt / what is it meant to feel like when you first lose your virginity / have hetero-sex?'

- 'If you are fed up of having sex, what's next?'

- 'What's it like to be in a relationship?'

- 'How can I teach my partner to understand my body better?'

- 'What's the most comfortable way to start having anal sex?'

- 'What is your best advice on giving head?'

Appendix H: Interview schedule

1. Introduction
- Introduce myself and project
- Outline the purpose, structure and length of the interview and check that this is ok with the young person.

2. Give overview of interview and emphasise key points:
- Emphasise that the young person does not have to answer any question that they do not want to and that they can stop the interview at any time.
- Go over confidentiality and anonymity procedures, explaining that I am going to record and what will happen to the recording. Refer the young person to the research information sheet, which they will already have seen. Explain the exceptions to confidentiality and give an example scenario. Ask the young person to sign the consent form if this has not already been done. If the young person signed a consent form for the focus group participation, go over the consent form again so that the young person is reminded and clear of what they are consenting to.
- Ask the young person if they have any questions.
- Ask the young person identify a fake name that they would like me to use in transcribing. Discuss why they have chosen this name.

Key questions to ask interview participants

1. Tell me about you and what's going on in your life at the moment.

2. What are some of things in your life that give you pleasure and make you feel good?

3. Would you describe yourself as a sexual person?

4. Could you tell me about some of the first or early experiences you have had that you would describe as sexual?

5. Have you ever had any bad sexual experiences? Can you tell me about this/these?

6. Have you ever had any sexual experiences that you would describe as pleasurable? Can you choose one and tell me about it.

Appendix I: Research sites

Research site	No. visits to site	Surveys completed at site	Interviews participants recruited from site	Focus participants recruited from site
FE College	2	100	4	1
Young people's sexual health clinic	3	45	0	0
Detached youth work sessions	3	21	0	0
University 1	1	17	0	0
University 2 Chlamydia screening session	1	16	1	0
Football tournament Chlamydia screening session	1	2	0	0
Leaving Care and Asylum Service	3	16	1	1
Training provider	1	14	2	0
Peer Educators group	2	11	6	6
Hostel for young people	1	9	0	0
Gay and bisexual men's youth group	1	7	0	0
Youth Centre 1	1	7	0	0
Young Mothers Group 1	1	6	1	1
Young mothers Group 2	1	4	0	0
Young mothers' programme	1	0	1	0
Youth Centre 2	3	0	0	6
Online	N/A	3	0	0
Total	**25**	**278**	**16**	**15**

Appendix J: Survey participant sample

Gender	Frequency (%)
Female	168 (60)
Male	109 (39)
No response	1 (<1)
Total	**278 (100)**

Age	Frequency (%)
16 - 17	103 (37)
18 – 19	87(31)
20-25	88 (32)
No response	0(0)
Total	**278 (100)**

Sexuality	Frequency (%)
Bisexual	14 (5)
Gay / lesbian	10 (4)
Straight	247 (89)
Don't know	4(1)
No response	3 (1)
Total	**278 (100)**

Ethnicity	Frequency (%)
Asian	25 (9)
Black African	49 (18)
Black Caribbean	42 (15)
Mixed	37 (13)
Other	30 (11)
White British / European	95 (34)
No response	0 (1)
Total	**278 (100)**

Religion	Frequency (%)
Christian	115 (41)
Muslim	41 (15)
Not religious	82 (30)
Maybe religious	19 (7)
Jewish	5 (2)
Other	16 (6)
No response	0 (0)
Total	**278 (100)**

Place of birth	Frequency (%)
Africa	25 (9)
Asia	10 (4)
Europe (not UK)	24 (9)
UK	189 (68)
Other	21 (7.5)
No response	9 (3)
Total	278 (100)

Sexual activity	Frequency (%)
Currently sexually active	162 (60)
Sexual active in the past, but not currently	50 (18)
Never sexually active	60 (22)
No response	6 (N/A)
Total	278 (100)

Sexual Experience level	Frequency (%)
Low	77 (30)
Medium	99 (38)
High	83 (32)
No response	19 (N/A)
Total	259 (100)

Appendix K: Focus group sample

Focus group	Fake name	Gender	Sexuality	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Sex exp level	Recruited from:
1	Vinnie	Female	Heterosexual	19	Black Caribbean	None	Medium	Young parents group
	Wallay	Male	Heterosexual	18	Black African	Christian	High	FE college
2	Jessica	Female	Heterosexual	17	Black African	Maybe - Muslim	Low	Peer educator programme
	Danielle	Female	Heterosexual	20	Black African	Muslim	Low	Peer educator programme
	Jasmine	Female	Heterosexual	17	Mixed	Maybe	Medium	Leaving Care Service
	Michael	Male	Heterosexual	17	White European	None	Low	FE college
3	Mark	Male	Heterosexual	17	Black Caribbean	No data	No data	Outreach sexual health project
	Ryan	Male	Heterosexual	17	Mixed	No data	No data	Outreach sexual health project
	Fats	Male	Heterosexual	21	Black Caribbean	No data	No data	Outreach sexual health project
	Luke	Male	Heterosexual	17	Black African	No data	No data	Outreach sexual health project
	Whiley	Male	Heterosexual	21	White British	No data	No data	Outreach sexual health project
	Imad	Male	Heterosexual	17	Asian	No data	No data	Outreach sexual health project
4	Indiah	Female	Bisexual	17	Black Caribbean	None	High	Peer educator programme
	Rochelle	Female	Bisexual	17	Black Caribbean	Christian	High	Friend of Indiah
	Chanelle	Female	Bisexual	18	Mixed	Christian	High	Peer educator programme

Appendix L: Interview sample

Fake name	Gender	Sexuality	Age	Ethnicity	Class	Religion	Recruited from:
Vinnie	Female	Heterosexual	19	Black Caribbean	Don't Know	None	Young parents group
Chanelle	Female	Bisexual	19	Mixed	Working / Middle	Christian	Peer educators programme
Michael	Male	Heterosexual	17	White British / European	Don't know	None	FE college
Beyonce	Female	Heterosexual	16	Black Caribbean	Middle	Yes	Young mothers' programme
Ruby	Female	Heterosexual	17	White British / European	Working	Maybe	FE college
Jessica	Female	Heterosexual	17	Black African	Working	Muslim (Maybe)	Peer educators programme
Tania	Female	Heterosexual	20	Black African	Don't Know	Christian	Leaving care service
Sarah	Female	Heterosexual	22	White British	Middle	Christian	FE college
Sheikh	Male	Gay	21	Mixed	Middle	Muslim	Friend of Sarah
Tommy	Male	Heterosexual	16	White British / European	Working	None	Training provider
Kat	Female	Heterosexual	19	Black Caribbean	Working	Christian	Peer educators programme
Oscar	Male	Heterosexual	17	White British / European	Working	None	Training provider
James	Male	Bisexual	19	White British / European	Working	None	Peer educators programme
Stephano	Male	Gay	16	White British / European	Working	None	Peer educators programme
Paul	Male	Gay	22	White British / European	Middle	None	University
Indiah	Female	Bisexual	17	Black Caribbean	Working	None	Peer educators programme

Appendix M: Method of analysis for open-ended survey questions.

1. Exported the list of responses to each open-ended question from SPSS into a word document and corrected spelling errors. This created a set of 9 textual documents containing all valid survey responses.

2. Imported each word document into Nvivo.

3. Read through each of the documents separately to identify common, interesting or unusual themes and patterns in each of the texts. I used Nvivo to open code each document, creating a separate set of codes for each question.

4. Ran a word frequency analysis on each document and created tag clouds to visualise frequently occurring words.

5. Compared the images and lists of frequently used words with the list of codes I had created from manually coding the data.

6. For each question I identified a set of codes that I wanted to include as variables in SPSS. These were selected to reflect the most frequently occurring themes (i.e. love, fun, mutuality for the question relating to Good sex) or themes that were not frequently occurring but that I was interested in exploring (i.e. pornography as an 'influence' on understandings of sex and relationships).

7. Created new variables in SPSS and went through the data set identifying whether or not each response mentioned each of the new variables.

8. Used SPSS to identify the number of responses that mentioned each code and to conduct bivariate analyses of who mentioned each of these themes.