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“It’s embarrassing that my own body betrays me”: A
critical thematic analysis of young women’s accounts of
painful sexual intercourse with men.

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Abstract

Recurrent pain during sexual intercourse is a prevalent yet stigmatised health issue that impacts almost a fifth of young women who have sex with men. Despite its significant effects on subjectivity construction, the majority of research on chronic coital pain has focused on causation and treatment from a medical perspective. Psychological studies that have examined women's experiences of painful sexual intercourse have largely ignored young women as a particularly vulnerable group, only including those who have been given a medical diagnosis and who identify as heterosexual. Additionally, the theoretical underpinnings of prior research regularly places the issue of coital pain at the level of the woman, with little consideration of the cultural and social environment within which she exists.

In the current study, I was interested in exploring how heteronormative ideals regarding sexuality and gender in Aotearoa New Zealand shape how young women with chronic coital pain understand themselves and their experiences, along with the subsequent possibilities available to them. I adopted the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism to make visible the particular ways of being and behaving that gender discourses allow and inhibit. My study used an anonymous online qualitative survey to gather data from 108 Aotearoa New Zealand women between the ages of 18 and 30 who regularly experience pain during penetrative sex with men. I undertook a constructionist thematic analysis, taking a deductive and critical approach to the interpretation of data, and applied the main principles of feminist poststructuralism to make sense of the themes generated. From my analysis, I identified a key theoretical concept known as the coital imperative. Six main themes were constructed from my data – 4 that supported the coital imperative and 2 that resisted it. These included: (1) the 'hot-blooded male'; (2) 'good girls' don't rock the boat; (3) the neoliberal postfeminist woman; (4) failed femininity; (5) resisting the coital imperative; and (6) alternative gender constructions in heterosexual relations. The findings of my study suggest that women readily draw on heteronormative ideals of gender and sexuality when constructing their subjectivities and frequently prioritise the needs of their male partners ahead of their own experience of pleasure. However, the visible adoption of egalitarian/feminist discourse that resists the coital imperative enables women to renegotiate conceptualisations of sex, allowing for equal pleasure and emotional satisfaction. As such, I argue that by unpacking the taken-for-granted assumptions of normative ideals, women are able to construct subjectivities based on adequacy and self-worth.

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