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

Abstract

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

Keywords: coital imperative, sexual desire, (hetero)sex, heterosexuality, sexuality research, thematic analysis

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Introduction

This research presents a qualitative feminist analysis of women's talk about sex and affection in the context of long-term[1] heterosexual[2] relationships. While (hetero)sexuality cannot be reduced to sexual practice alone, nonetheless sexual practices are often understood as a key aspect of understanding and interpreting heterosexual identities (Hockey, Meah & Robinson, 2007).

Within Western culture the notion that men want sex, while women want love, has widespread currency. Such conceptualisations of men's and women's sexuality are underpinned by mainstream discourses of heterosexuality, within a hegemonic and heteronormative framework. Hollway (1989) introduced the notion of a 'male sexual drive discourse' in which men are positioned as possessing an inherent and 'insatiable' sex drive and where sex is constructed as both 'natural' and necessary. In contrast to the portrayal of men as possessing an inherent need for sex, women have often been portrayed as having little or no desire (Fine, 1988; Hollway, 1989), and are instead represented as wanting 'to be loved or cherished' (Braun, Gavey & McPhillips, 2003:238). Many (heterosexual) women are reported to idealise intercourse and to want sex to be about emotions, with an emphasis on romance (see, for example, Hite, 1976/2004; Jackson, 2005:296). Furthermore, mainstream discourses of sex reduce 'real' sex to 'penis-in-vagina' intercourse (Richardson, 1996:278). There is a 'coital imperative' where it is 'taken for granted that intercourse is an inherent part of heterosex' (McPhillips, Braun & Gavey, 2001:238-

44 239), despite it not necessarily being the most pleasurable act for many heterosexual
45 women (e.g., Hite, 1976/2004; Bancroft, 2002). Lowe (2005) concisely summarises
46 Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson's (1998) observations that mainstream
47 culture dictates that for women 'heterosex is supposed to be an emotional, intense,
48 and escalating experience, ending with vaginal intercourse and male ejaculation'
49 (p.80).

50 Within traditional mainstream understandings, women's desires are portrayed as at
51 worst absent, or at best, passive. If women are ever represented as possessing sexual
52 agency then this is often interpreted as the result of women's 'need' to reproduce
53 (Oakley, 1980; Hollway, 1989). This necessity to reproduce has also been referred to
54 as an imperative (e.g., Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000; Glazer, 2001). The 'motherhood' or
55 'birth' imperative prescriptively locates women as unfulfilled until they become
56 mothers, also rendering deficient those women who choose to remain childfree (e.g.,
57 Morell, 2000) (and 'marriage' and 'the (nuclear) family' uphold the taken-for-granted
58 hegemonic status of heterosexuality, see, for example, Hockey et al., 2007).
59 Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005:16-17) theorise a 'missing discourse of
60 ambivalence', whereby women may want the outcomes of sexual activity such as
61 'intimacy, satisfying partner's needs and avoiding relationship tension' (in addition to
62 children) but not necessarily the (hetero)sex itself. Subsequently in mainstream
63 cultural discourses men's and women's sexuality often becomes dichotomous: men's
64 desire is active; men initiate, seek out, and want sex, and women's desire is passive;
65 their interest in sex is related to the outcomes of sex rather than to the sex itself.

66 These ’traditional’ mainstream cultural discourses are unhelpful in a number of ways,
67 presenting women’s ‘lack of desire’ as problematic rather than positioning men’s
68 ‘excessive desire’ as a problem. Furthermore, mainstream discourses of sexuality
69 serve to prioritise men’s pleasure. This leads to a diminishing of the importance of
70 women’s enjoyment of (hetero)sex and sexual activities. Consequently there is a
71 clear hierarchy regarding whose pleasure is important within (hetero)sex: men are
72 positioned as not only ‘needing’ sex, but also ‘deserving’ pleasure, whereas women’s
73 pleasure is of little or no importance. This has been recognised and termed a ‘double
74 standard’ that ‘subordinate[s] women’s sexuality to that of men’ (Jackson & Cram,
75 2003:115; see also Hite, 1976/2004).

76 These prescriptive discourses contribute to the reinforcement of ‘the dominant
77 cultural narratives of dualism, male hegemony and heteronormativity’ (Myerson,
78 Crawley, Anstey, Kessler & Okopny, 2007:95). It is important to briefly note the ways
79 in which discourses of masculinity underpin the dichotomous framing of masculinity
80 and femininity. Just as traditional notions of women and femininity position women’s
81 sexuality as secondary to men’s, so traditional notions of men and masculinity
82 reinforce this position and frame men’s sexuality as of primary importance. They do
83 this by prescribing and regulating ‘masculinity’ within powerful hegemonic ideologies
84 which maintain the subordination of women (see, for example, Wetherall & Edley,
85 1999; Terry & Braun, 2009). Despite this, rather than considering men demanding,
86 women have been reported to justify men’s behaviour by making positive
87 comparisons ‘between their own husbands (or partners) and other people’s’ (Dryden,
88 1999:45). This could be a reflection of the complexity of masculinities, which allows

men in heterosexual relationships to both comply with and simultaneously resist ‘traditional’ notions, resulting in men engaging with different ‘versions’ of masculinity (e.g., Allen, 2007; Hockey et al., 2007; Terry & Braun, 2009). One such version theorised in an interview study of New Zealand heterosexual men, is that of the ‘enlightened man’, who through his heterosexual relationship is able to distance himself from his ‘immature’ pre-relationship self. The ‘immature’ (past) version of themselves that these men drew on are framed as highly focused on penetrative sex for their own pleasure, independent of love or relationships, in order to prove their masculinity. The men recognised that this meant treating women as objects. However, in their ‘enlightened’ (present) version of ‘mature’ masculinity the men saw sex as embedded within love and relationships, as one participant states ‘an ingredient to make up the cake of the relationship’ (Terry & Braun, 2009:171). With this in mind, men’s understandings of masculinity may be complex and constantly changing, and it is possible that women make positive comparisons which reflect their male partners’ embodiment (or display) of ‘mature’ masculinity.

Similarly, understandings of women’s sexuality have changed, and continue to change (see, for example, Hockey et al., 2007). Sieg has highlighted that ‘in the 21st century, young women’s sexualities are often portrayed as liberated and empowered’ (2007:175). This may be in part due to a rise since the 1990s onwards of the ‘ladette’ – defined as ‘girls or women who behave in ‘laddish’ or ‘boyish’ ways’ (Jackson, 2006:343). Despite critical portrayal of ladette culture, there has been speculation that perhaps the ladette is ‘taking space once regarded the principal or sole preserve of men’ (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007:254). While Jackson and Tinkler here

112 refer to literal space, this could be extended to consider the more metaphorical
113 space ‘between the sheets’. Ladette culture is argued to challenge traditional gender
114 stereotypes and encourage young (heterosexual) women to not only talk more
115 openly about sex, but also to engage in sexual behaviour with less restraint (Jackson,
116 2006; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007) and without fear of ‘moral judgement’. However, little
117 research has explored the implications of the rise of ladette culture (Jackson &
118 Tinkler, 2007) for women’s lived realities, so it is unclear whether these ‘new’
119 discourses of both femininity and masculinity have produced changes in women’s
120 experience of sexual desire, sexual activity and sexual pleasure.

121 Most recently, feminist research has explored specific aspects of (hetero)sex such as
122 portrayals of men’s ‘insatiable desires’ in women’s magazines (e.g., Farvid & Braun,
123 2006), and sexual consent (e.g., Gavey, 1992; Walker, 1997; Tyler, 2009). Researchers
124 have also critiqued relationship advice literature and self help books (e.g., Potts,
125 1998; Boynton, 2003; Tyler, 2008), arguing that there is a tendency for biological
126 discourses of sex to dominate within this style of literature (Tyler, 2008) and for (so
127 called) ‘experts’ to prescribe ‘a version of relationships that most (feminist)
128 psychologists wouldn’t necessarily endorse’ (Boynton, 2003:237).

129 However, there has been less focus on speaking to women about their own
130 experiences regarding (hetero)sex and relationships. The picture that emerges from
131 the small body of existing research is one of complexity. Some recent research
132 indicates that more ‘traditional’ discourses of male and female sexuality and desire
133 still predominate. Sieg (2007) spoke with young English heterosexual women aged
134 between sixteen and twenty-five about their experiences of sexuality and

135 relationships, finding these women were disappointed and dissatisfied with their
136 relationships, ‘struggling against inequalities, disadvantage and limited relational and
137 sexual choices’ (p.183). In similar earlier research she found that some young Welsh
138 heterosexual women felt that their boyfriends wanted more sex than they did. The
139 women considered it inappropriate to instigate sex themselves, instead leaving this
140 to their boyfriends, thereby, sticking ‘fairly closely to what traditional gender
141 stereotypes would teach them’ (Sieg, 2000:501).

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

148 Other research suggests that a cultural shift may be evident that disrupts the
149 expectation that men want sex, while women want love. Allen’s interview research
150 with young New Zealand women indicated that any suggestion that ‘young women
151 want only love from relationships … is outdated’ and that ‘traditional notions of
152 passive female and active male (hetero)sexuality’ are too simplistic and do not
153 capture the contemporary nuances of heterosexual relationships (2003a:231).
154 Meanwhile, young New Zealand women in Jackson and Cram’s (2003) research
155 critically discussed the sexual double standard. They described how definitions such
156 as ‘stud’ were used to positively describe sexually active boys, whereas negative
157 terms such as ‘slag’ were in use for sexually active girls, and they challenged terms

158 they considered unfair. They positioned themselves as having sexual desire, but were
159 aware of demands brought about in 'negotiating the confusion of sexual pressures,
160 expectations and desires' (Jackson & Cram, 2003:121). This led the authors to
161 conclude that while the women were knowledgeable and agentic (rather than
162 passive), their conceptualisations of sex were underpinned by multiple and
163 contradictory discourses and uncertainties.

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

171 There is a need for further unravelling of the complexity of women's experiences of
172 sexuality and the implications of the cultural discourses which have already been
173 identified. Exploring women's conceptualisations of (hetero)sex can contribute
174 further to understanding the nuances of women's lived realities, particularly in the
175 domain of sexuality. The 'traditional' notions of men's and women's desire and
176 sexuality that we have highlighted, work in the service of a 'patriarchal ideology'
177 (Myerson et al., 2007:94). Drawing attention to these commonly held notions offers
178 the potential to carve a space in which women are able to question and challenge
179 these discourses of sexuality. Further, it has been noted that feminists would do well
180 to move beyond monolithic accounts which focus on heterosexual sex as purely

181 oppression, and to avoid assuming that women are, or ever have been, ‘cultural

182 dupes’. Instead, there is a need to instead recognise ‘the diversity of

183 heterosexualities which women and men inhabit; *and* the agency of women (and

184 men) within institutionalised heterosexuality’ (Hockey et al., 2007:33). To undertake

185 empirical research is one way in which the diversity of women’s experiences can

186 potentially be recognised.

187 Furthermore, the term ‘Western Culture’ often assumes homogeneity of participants,

188 where differences in particular countries may be overlooked. While some research

189 which investigates women and (hetero)sex has taken place within psychology and

190 sociology in a U.K. context (e.g., Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Sieg, 2007; Hockey et al.,

191 2007) much existing research has often been New Zealand (e.g., Jackson & Cram,

192 2003; Allen, 2003a, 2003b) and U.S. based (e.g., Bancroft et al., 2003). Hence the

193 interview data presented here, gathered from speaking to women about (hetero)sex,

194 offers a distinctly (and relatively unique) British contribution to understandings of

195 (hetero)sex.

196 **The Study**

197 Ten women were recruited through the first author’s personal contacts at university

198 and at work, and then through snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were that

199 the women were over the age of eighteen and currently in (what they defined as) a

200 ‘long-term heterosexual relationship’ with a man. Basic demographic information

201 was gathered and is summarised in Table 1. All the women identified as able bodied,

202 eight identified as white, one as Black British and one as Black African. Nine of the

203 women identified as heterosexual, and one as bisexual. Five were in full-time paid

204 employment, one was a full-time student, and four were full-time students who were
205 also in part-time employment. The women's ages ranged from twenty-one to forty-
206 three (with a mean age of twenty-eight), and the length of time in their current
207 relationship varied from nine months to twenty seven years (with a mean of nine
208 years)[1].

209 Insert Table 1 about here

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

223

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

224 **Results and Discussion**

225 **1. Women 'desiring desire' versus men's 'insatiable desire'**

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

241 However, the dominant account within the data was of experiencing a clear lack of
242 desire. Heather commented 'I've never found myself with a sex drive, very
243 infrequently', and Liv stated 'I don't think I have a hugely high sex drive'. Both these
244 women, and many of the others, had little interest in sex, echoing what Fine (1988)
245 termed the 'missing discourse of desire'. Yet despite the prevalence of a lack of
246 desire, *all* the women framed sexual desire as desira*ble*. They conceptualised a desire

247 for sex as a ‘normal’, ‘innate’, and ‘natural’ part of a relationship, reflecting
248 normative understandings of biologically based sexual ‘drives’ and desires (e.g.,
249 Gavey, McPhillips & Braun, 1999; Tyler, 2008). As Mary commented, ‘it would be
250 unnatural not to have sex’. Alice asked ‘why do I never feel horny?’, and Heather said
251 that if she ‘could suddenly take a pill which would make me a bit more horny I
252 actually would do it.’

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

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

265 These quotations reveal the way in which the women not only situated their lack of
266 desire for sex (per se) as problematic, but also located their own lack of desire as ‘the
267 problem’ in their relationships, rather than locating either men’s desires, or cultural
268 expectations around sex, as the source of the ‘problem’. Bancroft (2002) cautions
269 against labelling a lack of desire in women as a dysfunction, specifically referring to

270 the prescription of drugs such as ‘female Viagra’. This ties in with concerns raised by
271 Tiefer (2001, 2008) who has emphasised that women’s desire to have a ‘sex drive’
272 puts the pharmaceutical companies in a powerful position, through which they can
273 take advantage of women’s vulnerability by oversimplifying sexual ‘problems’ and
274 making women think they are curable through drugs. In her campaign against the
275 creation of the ‘illness’ of ‘female sexual dysfunction’ (www.newviewcampaign.org)
276 she highlights her concerns around the pharmaceutical companies promoting drugs
277 as ‘magic fixes’. Tiefer and others argue that an individual women’s ‘lack of sexual
278 desire’ is not easily reducible to a medical diagnosis: there may be many reasons why
279 women lack a desire for sexual activity, ranging from ‘individual’ causes such as stress
280 or relationship difficulties (e.g., Bancroft, 2002; Bancroft et al., 2003; Drew, 2003) or
281 more overarching causes such as the expectations and constraints of mainstream
282 culture.

283 While not advocating that it is appropriate to simply ‘normalise’ women lacking
284 sexual desire, the idea of pharmaceutical intervention has wide-ranging implications
285 around the ‘promotion’ of illness in order to sell a ‘cure’. In contrast there is far less
286 focus on the physiological, psychological, or even relational side effects, or indeed
287 the effectiveness, of such ‘cures’. While in recent years research has considered the
288 (sometimes negative) impact of men’s Viagra use on women in their heterosexual
289 relationship (e.g., Potts, Gavey, Grace & Vares, 2003; Potts, Grace, Gavey & Vares,
290 2004), there has been little interest in exploring the impact of women’s Viagra on
291 women or their partners.

292 Furthermore, Alice's reference to magazines in particular suggests that conduits of
293 popular culture (such as women's magazines, and perhaps sex 'manuals') shape some
294 women's view of their own (lack of) sexual desire (Tyler, 2008), by presenting a
295 homogeneous set of (arguably unachievable) ideals in relation to sex (e.g., Caldas-
296 Coulthard, 1996). While this is an area which has not entirely escaped the attention
297 of feminist researchers (e.g., Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Hockey
298 et al., 2007; Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008), it requires ongoing and further investigation
299 in order to understand the ever changing and complex links between popular cultural
300 discourses and the ways in which women make sense of their lived experience.

301 Not only did the women lack desire (despite desiring desire), they often also
302 minimised any importance around sex within their relationship. Liv commented: 'I
303 don't think it [sex] is that important. If I was honest', and she was not alone, and yet
304 many women reported in engaging in (somewhat) regular sexual activity. The
305 interviews probed the women to explore why they would engage in sexual activity if
306 they lacked desire, and if sex lacked importance. However their responses reflected a
307 struggle to articulate the ways in which sex *is* important to them other than it simply
308 being 'the done thing': 'It's never been important to me actually, y'know it's always
309 been something, you're in a relationship with somebody and you sleep with them
310 and that's it' (Clare). Mary drew on the notion of relational reciprocity when she
311 stated that: 'I feel like, he would like to have a sex life, and I feel like that part of a
312 relationship is about give and take'. This suggests that reciprocity exists not only
313 during coitus itself as previously identified (Braun et al., 2003), but also around a
314 wider context of how, when and why sex happens within the relationship. Here Mary

315 also introduces the notion of engaging in sex because 'he' [her partner] wants to
316 have a 'sex life', which was echoed throughout many of the other women's accounts.
317 So in stark contrast to the women's reports of lacking desire, their understanding of
318 men's desire was unambiguous: men need sex and their desire for it is ubiquitous.
319 Heather said: 'I do it because I know a man needs it'. Clare commented: '[h]e's a
320 man, and I think that's a man's thing. Men always think of the relationship as sex'.
321 The women understood men as actively sexual, felt that their 'needs' should be met,
322 and positioned themselves as having a 'duty' to meet those 'needs'. Hence the
323 women's talk strongly reflected the 'male sexual drive discourse' (Hollway, 1989:54)
324 where for men sex is a 'natural' necessity. The women's accounts drew on and
325 reinforced traditional notions of masculinity, and in the main did not invoke more
326 progressive constructions of masculinity (e.g., Allen, 2007; Terry & Braun, 2009).
327 In the main then, the women's talk echoed binary understandings of sex and sexual
328 desire. Their discussion of 'desire' was underpinned by a continuum of desire, with
329 men and their 'rampant desires' (and need for sex) at one end of the continuum and
330 women and their lack of desire at the other end.

331 **2. Sex equals penetration**

332 While the women were not directly asked in this research about their specific sexual
333 practices, their talk nonetheless authenticated the coital imperative. (Hetero)sex was
334 clearly understood by the women as meaning penis-in-vagina intercourse.
335 Furthermore, penis-in-vagina intercourse was portrayed not just as an inherent *part*
336 of sex, but as the very definition of sex itself. Mary stated: 'sex is penetration. That's
337 how I would kind of define it', and Heather echoes her in the comment that: 'sex for

338 me is pretty black and white. Sex for me is intercourse and that's it'. Any other sexual
339 acts besides penetration were viewed as part of a 'sexual package', a 'warm-up' in
340 preparation for the 'main event'. As Liv said 'It's the build up, there's the foreplay,
341 and then you have intercourse'. Mary agreed, seeing the 'build-up' as a 'healthy' *part*
342 of sex: 'Well I think that sex is just penetration but I think that it should be
343 accompanied by foreplay, in order to have a healthy sex life, it can't just be about
344 penetration, there's gotta be a build up and there's gotta be the foreplay around it'.
345 Mary's framing of how sex 'should' happen clearly echoes formulations put forward
346 by sexual script theorists (for a summary of these 'scripts' see Frith & Kitzinger,
347 2001).

348 The women's talk echoed conventional heteronormative understandings of sex and
349 of 'the coital imperative' (McPhillips et al., 2001:238-9), according to which penis-in-
350 vagina intercourse is an assumed and 'compulsory' part of sex. Even if sex was
351 conceptualised as more than penis-in-vagina intercourse, coital sex was viewed as an
352 obligatory 'goal' of sex. This is exemplified by Sarah in her statement that: 'y'know
353 obviously, penetrative sex is like the main thing', indicating that it is only when
354 intercourse has happened that the 'sexual package' is complete (Gavey et al.,
355 1999:35). Researchers have highlighted the risks associated with (usually
356 unprotected) penis-in-vagina intercourse for both men and women. For women in
357 particular though, penetrative vaginal intercourse poses both direct (e.g., STDs,
358 HIV/AIDs, unwanted pregnancy) and indirect risks (cervical cancer caused by specific
359 STDs, the side effects of contraception, the social and psychological outcomes of
360 unwanted pregnancy). While the coital imperative remains intact (Gavey et al., 1999)

361 women (and men) are expected to regularly engage in an act even when it has the
362 potential to jeopardise their health and wellbeing, and when it might not be
363 pleasurable for both parties involved. The coital imperative also sanctions penis-in-
364 vagina intercourse as the only sexual option, rather than it existing as one item on a
365 varied sexual 'menu'. This focus on penis-in-vagina intercourse has come under
366 scrutiny in relation to pleasure; while (hetero)sex is *assumed* to be the most
367 appropriate source of pleasure, this is not always the case for (heterosexual) women
368 (e.g., Hite, 1976/2004; Bancroft, 2002).

369 **3. (Lack of) pleasure, passivity, and women's 'gatekeeping' of sex**

370 When the women's talk turned to pleasure, the nuances of individual women's
371 experiences became apparent, and the women's enjoyment of sexual activity varied
372 significantly. Some of the women were enthusiastic about their enjoyment in sex,
373 focusing on orgasm as the site of their pleasure. Sarah stated that 'orgasm is the best
374 thing I ever found to be honest.' Potts (2000: 56) has identified an 'orgasm
375 imperative' in which the orgasm is viewed as 'natural', the emotional and physical
376 conclusion to (hetero)sex, and the women's talk reflected this notion. For example,
377 Mary, who has never orgasmed, said: 'always in the back of my head is that […] I have
378 enjoyed what we've had but could I have enjoyed it more?' Even those who
379 expressed enthusiasm about sex and their sexual pleasure commented that they had
380 no desire to instigate sex: 'once it's happening I enjoy it, and then I think after 'why
381 don't we do this more often'? (Clare). However, some of the women spoke about an
382 absence of pleasure in sex:

383 ‘He’ll say ‘oh, did you enjoy that?’ and I’ll go ‘oh yeah’ and really I just can’t wait to
384 watch Eastenders and that‘s sad I know. […] Obviously if I’m not enjoying it… then I’m
385 having to pretend I am. […] He puts all this effort into it bless him (laughs) and I’d be
386 just as happy with a cup of tea’ (Heather).

387 Early sex research and sex manuals that focused on sexual pleasure have been
388 critiqued for emphasising men’s pleasure more than women’s. In reviewing the
389 biomedical, nursing, and feminist literature, Hyde discussed the way in which women
390 may see (hetero)sex as ‘routine that comes with the deal of marriage or partnership’
391 (2007:318). Hence, women’s pleasure in the experience of penis-in-vagina
392 intercourse seems ambivalent. However, Heather’s narrative indicates that her
393 partner cares about her pleasure, perhaps more than she does. While the women’s
394 talk mainly shored up traditional notions of heterosex and heterosexuality, at times
395 they spoke of deep and caring relationships with their partners, demonstrating that
396 the women report alternative ‘versions’ of masculinity, and reflecting the complexity
397 of heterosexuality (e.g., Allen, 2007; Hickey et al., 2007; Terry & Braun, 2009).

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

406 (Clare). Because women 'want' sex less, they 'give' or 'offer' (or, indeed, withhold)
407 any sexual activity that takes place.

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

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

421 Nikki: 'Before you had sex did you talk about having sex?'

422 Pippa: 'No, no I think that takes the magic away'.

423 Some of the women reported engaging in unwanted but consensual sex. They
424 emphasised that they did not feel 'forced', but that it was just easier to engage in sex
425 when 'he' (their partner) wanted to. In this sense the women seemed to be *active*ly
426 making a choice to be *passive*ly present in sex to satisfy their partner's 'needs'. When
427 asked whether she ever said no to her husband's 'throwing himself at her', Madge

428 commented that if she did: ‘we have a sulk and he’s tossing and turning all night and
429 y’know, it’s not worth it to be honest’. When Jessica talked about this issue, she often
430 laughed and her laughter was uncomfortable, clearly implying she was well aware
431 that this type of sex was far from ‘ideal’: ‘[B]ut sometimes you have to give in
432 (laughs). […] I might say to him ‘alright but if you’re quick’ (laughs). Something along
433 those lines. ‘Just be quick’! And I probably, y’know, I’m just submissive about it
434 really’.

435 Clearly Jessica felt that at times, at least, she was passive in her sexual relationship.
436 She also raised the issue of ‘quickie sex’. It has been argued that ‘quickies’ reinforce
437 men’s active sexuality as a priority over women’s passive or submissive sexuality
438 (Potts, 1998), and while women remain recipients of men’s desire, their enjoyment of
439 sex is questionable (e.g., Drew, 2003). Potts (1998) critiques the heterosexual
440 relationship ‘self-help’ book *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom: A Guide to lasting*
441 *Romance and Passion* (Gray, 1995). This genre of publication is influential in
442 ‘regulating current trends in sexual practices including women’s perception of sex
443 and desire’ (Potts, 1998:153). Gray’s clients were encouraged to engage in ‘quickies’
444 because ‘to be patient and regularly take the time that a woman needs in sex, a man
445 needs to enjoy the occasional quickie’ (Gray, 1995:77, quoted in Potts, 1998:159).
446 Gray reports one of his male clients explaining to his partner during a therapeutic
447 session that ‘if you are ok with occasional quickies, I promise to never expect you to
448 respond. It will just be your gift to me. I don’t expect you to get anything out of it.
449 You can lie there like a dead log!’ The woman, unsurprisingly, is less convinced; ‘I still
450 don’t feel comfortable with the idea of quickie sex’ (Gray, 1995:79, quoted in Potts,

451 1998:160). ‘Quickie’ sex’ is not embedded in women’s own interests or enjoyment,
452 but perpetuates the dominance of men’s interests in discourses of sexual pleasure.
453 This engagement in unwanted consensual sex supports ‘sexual script’ theories where
454 women are ‘emotionally available to men’ which in turn ‘makes it difficult for women
455 to refuse sex’ (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001:215). Acknowledging women's participation in
456 unwanted sex has been termed ‘speaking the unspeakable’ (see, Gavey, 1992:325).
457 There are many reasons why women may be persuaded or coerced into sex. These
458 include not thinking about refusal as a potential option, instead seeing the idea that
459 sex is required and compulsory as ‘normal’. Nonetheless, coerced consent is an
460 important topic to consider in relation to women’s power and pleasure within
461 heterosex (Gavey, 1992).

462 **4. Love and affection**

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

474 require ‘looking after’ and being loved within (heterosexual) relationships.
475 Alternatively, a more positive reading is that these women derive pleasure and
476 support from their partner and their relationships, which are about more than sex
477 alone (Hockey et al., 2007).

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

497

498 **Conclusion**

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

516 Although less apparent, in places the women's narratives indicated their agency and
517 enjoyment in (hetero)sex. Although these excerpts were considerably less common,
518 they have been included here to provide a nuanced account of the data. Further,
519 their minimal presence serves to emphasise that if feminist research is to serve any
520 emancipatory agenda, which moves beyond monolithic and subordinating accounts

521 of women's sexuality (Hockey et al., 2007), then we must continue to focus on the
522 topic of hetero(sex) and unpick ways in which more libratory accounts might be
523 enabled. To this end, there is a pressing need to make different constructions of
524 (hetero)sex more widely available to young people, in order to challenge both the
525 normative understandings of the 'nature' of men and women's desire and the script
526 for (hetero)sexual encounters. It has been argued that sexuality education is framed
527 around more traditional gender roles with a focus on (the avoidance of) reproduction
528 and sexually transmitted diseases (Johnson, 1996; Allen, 2004). It has been
529 highlighted that this promotes narrow and negative discourses of sexuality (Johnson,
530 1996) which do little to move beyond the 'missing discourse of desire' (Fine, 1988).
531 Allen (2004) discusses how the inclusion of 'a discourse of erotics' within sexuality
532 education has the potential to empower women. Doing so could provide them with
533 the entitlement to experience desire and pleasure in (hetero)sex. Such an approach
534 need not exclude health, but instead would allow women to be active subjects who
535 are able to initiate safe sex themselves.

536 This small piece of research makes evident the complexities of women's lived
537 realities and the contradictory discourses that are available to them to make sense of
538 their experiences of sexuality and relationships. To unpick these complexities further,
539 future research which used a larger sample of women would be useful in supporting
540 and elaborating upon existing findings. There were limitations in our sample, both in
541 its size, but also in our lack of attention to the ways in which social class intersect
542 with heterosexuality. Previous research has indicated that class and age are relevant
543 constructs when considering matters of sex and sexuality (Hockey et al., 2007).

544 Future research in this area that included men and/or both partners in the discussion
545 would be useful in understanding the different discourses that men and women draw
546 on when discussing their experiences of sexuality and sexual relationships. Men are
547 less commonly participants in feminist research, but purposive sampling and the use
548 of innovative techniques to encourage engaged participation could offer further
549 insight into men's beliefs and understandings of (hetero)sex and (hetero)sexuality.
550 Furthermore, research that considered strategies for long term change of men's and
551 women's experiences of (hetero)sex would be useful within education, policy and
552 healthcare.

553

554 Notes

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

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

567

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695

696 **Table 1: Demographic details of participants**

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

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698