

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UNWANTED:  
WOMEN'S TALK OF DESIRE AND (DIS)PLEASURE IN HETEROSEX

by

Emily J. Thomas

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## Abstract

### The Good, The Bad, And The Unwanted: Women's Talk Of Desire And (Dis)pleasure In Heterosex

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Emily J. Thomas

Psychology

Ryerson University

Critical and feminist sexuality scholarship contends that many key sexuality concepts are taken-for-granted definitions that have accrued common sense status but are missing an exploration of what these concepts *mean* to women. For example, sex is treated as synonymous with penile-vaginal intercourse, 'good' and 'bad' sex have implicit meanings in media representations, and consent is often seen as the dividing line between sex and sexual violence. This thesis explores and challenges these dominant constructions of female sexuality through one-on-one in-depth interviews with twenty-four women. Key findings explore how participants resist and recapitulate dominant accounts of what 'counts' as sex, what makes for good and bad sex, and how consent and desire are negotiated in sexual relationships. Given the considerable disparity between mainstream media representations of female sexuality and women's embodied sexual experiences, this research aims to explore women's discursive constructions of their sexual experiences as they elect to define them.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all of the vibrant and inspiring women in my life—my mother, grandmother, mentors, and best of friends. You have shown me the beauty of curiosity, strength to trust my inner voice, and courage in challenging the status quo.

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## The Good, the Bad, and the Unwanted:

### Women's Talk of Desire and (Dis)pleasure in Heterosex

Dominant heterosexual discourses position intercourse-derived orgasm as the ultimate goal of sex (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Potts, 2000). That is, the typical sequence of heterosex begins with foreplay, leading to penile-vaginal intercourse, which culminates in male orgasm, with or without female orgasm (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003; Frith, 2015a). Critical sexuality research has challenged the centrality of this dominant discourse and has endeavoured to explore alternative constructions of sex and sexuality (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). From a critical and feminist poststructuralist perspective, sex is no longer understood as “a natural act” (Tiefer, 2004) determined entirely by biological “needs”, but is understood to be deeply intertwined with social context (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003) and gendered relations of power (Fine, 1988; Foucault, 1978; Gavey, 1989; Gill, 2009). That is, our understanding of sex, sexuality, and gender is informed by the discursive resources (i.e. shared beliefs and norms) that are available in a particular time and place (i.e., cultural context) (Butler, 1990) and are wielded by modern power (Foucault, 1978). Knowledge production about gender and sex, among other dominant truth regimes, is intrinsically and inseparably linked to power, possessing not only the authority to unveil ‘truths’ but to construct them as well. As Foucault (1980) asserts:

Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power [...] Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (p. 131).



In the realm of sex, sexuality, and gender, dominant ‘regimes of truth’ have long been grounded in theories of biological essentialism where (gender and sexual) differences were given authority as natural and legitimate. It is useful to consider Foucault’s work on sexuality and Butler’s work on gender, and how these can be woven together, in deconstructing the historical underpinnings of sex and gender as fixed and essential. Foucault (1978) contests this reductionist stance in his writings about the history of sexuality as he rejects the ‘natural’ and postulates that sexuality is a “dense transfer point for relations of power” (p. 103). His theorizations about sexuality work to destabilize notions of human sexuality as an essential quality, to trouble the institutions (e.g., religion, politics) that bolster ‘truths’ about sex and sexuality, and to recognize sexuality and the body as central sites of social control. In her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) demonstrates how gender and sex are intrinsically linked, and how, like sex, gender is something that is performed (i.e., something one *does*) rather than a stable identity category (i.e., something one *has*). As Butler (1990) describes what she terms ‘the heterosexual matrix’, gender is culturally constituted in binary terms which relies on binary categories of female and male: “The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (pp. 22-23). The regulatory binary mould problematically insinuates that desire reflects gender and vice versa, scaffolding a compulsory heterosexuality. This repetitive and labour-intensive *doing* of sex, sexuality, and gender becomes continuously and automatically enacted to the point that the ritualistic set of behaviours come to feel natural (Foucault, 1978; Butler, 1990). By reducing gender and sex to a restricted set of behaviours, we are ignoring the complex sexual practices that are collectively negotiated through meaning

making (Kippax & Stephenson, 2005), and both enacted *and* resisted in practice (Lafrance, Stelzl, & Bullock, in press). As Kippax and Stephenson (2005) assert: “Sexual practice is a *social* and *cultural* practice within a particular historical time and place, and embedded in specific locations and formations” (p. 363).

From a social constructionist perspective, knowledge and concept development are socially produced and historically and culturally contingent (Burr, 2003). Accordingly, “knowledge is understood not to be neutral—it is closely associated with power. Those who have the power to regulate what counts as truth are able to maintain their access to material advantages and power” (Gavey, 1989, p. 462) and the stories that become privileged over others reflect those power structures (Gavey, 1989; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2011). In the sphere of sexuality, it is male sexuality that holds the utmost power and therefore many definitions are centered on male versions of desire and pleasure. This is connected to theories of gender as existing only in relation to one another, denoting an opposing signification (Butler, 1990) and following philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, a conflation of the universal person as masculine. In this way, femaleness exists only in relation to or as an opposition to a privileged maleness. How we come to understand dominant ideas are heavily influenced by culture and context, and in this way they represent *conceptions* rather than rigid *definitions* (Gergen, 1985). Sexual pleasure and satisfaction continue to be conceptualized through a heterosexual lens privileging male sexuality. Male pleasure is prioritized in dominant cultural discourses and therefore female desire is de-emphasized (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012). Discourses are patterns of meaning, or sets of sociocultural values and assumptions that shape our common understandings of phenomena (Burr, 2003). Importantly, owing to their greater authority, dominant discourses become designated as natural, normal, and commonsensical (Gavey, 1989).

Two imperatives are central to dominant discourses of heterosex: the *coital imperative* which positions intercourse as the key element of sex (Gavey, Braun, & McPhillips, 1999) and the *orgasmic imperative* which suggests that sex must end in orgasm (Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Potts, 2000). According to the typical sequence of (hetero)sex, sex begins with foreplay which progresses to intercourse and ultimately ends with male orgasm (Fahs, 2011a; Potts, 2000). This normative sequence of heterosex positions intercourse derived orgasm as the ultimate satisfying sexual experience (Frith 2013; Potts, 2000) despite many women's expressions that orgasm is not central to sexual fulfillment (e.g., Nicolson & Burr, 2003). In this way, sexual pleasure and orgasm have become synonymous, and male pleasure is privileged as male orgasm is more readily achieved through intercourse (Frith, 2013). Missing in this taken-for-granted assumption about what constitutes sexual pleasure are female discourses of desire (see Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006). In fact, many women have suggested that intercourse is not necessarily the most pleasurable sexual experience and that orgasm is more readily achieved through other forms of 'sex' (Nicolson & Burr, 2003), for example through oral sex (Braun et al., 2003). Further, orgasm is not always central to sexual fulfilment and other intimate or sexual activities, such as kissing and touching, are more pleasurable for some women (see Nicolson & Burr, 2003). How, then, does intercourse maintain its master status as *the* pinnacle of sexual experience? If sex and intercourse, and intercourse and pleasure have become synonymous, what other experiences of possible pleasure are being silenced? How does available language shape the way we feel, perform, and desire sex? Where social and political realities play a central role in shaping sexual practices, it is useful to consider "sexual embodiment as social embodiment" (Jackson & Scott, 2002) by understanding the inextricable nature of sexual practices from their deep rooted position within dominant social practices and to explore how

ideas surrounding sex, sexuality, consent, and (embodied) desire both create and constrain our own meaning making practices.

### **Let's Talk About Sex: Taken-For-Granted Assumptions About What 'Counts' as Sex**

The parameters of what 'counts' as sex have been poorly defined in the literature (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). That is, sex has garnered widely understood and taken-for-granted meaning, and is often treated as synonymous with penile-vaginal intercourse (i.e., the coital imperative, see Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003; Gavey, McPhillips, & Braun, 1999) despite a dearth of research concerning people's internalized individual meanings attached to myriad possible sexual practices. Bourdieu and colleagues (1991) refer to this as "spontaneous sociology": a process whereby certain definitions are taken for granted as common sense without a proper reflection of the historical and cultural origins of that particular meaning. This presumed definition needs to be challenged and explored, in order to gain a better understanding of embodied sexual desire: Why is sexual intercourse considered to be the ultimate sexual experience? Are consequences of sex (e.g., possible pregnancy or STIs) more central to definitions of sex than are desire and pleasure? How do these conceptualizations of sex impact *what, when, and with whom* individuals are willing to engage in sex?

Researchers have conducted quantitative studies to explore what people count as sex in the United States (Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2000; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010), the United Kingdom (Pitts & Rahman, 2001), Australia (Richters & Song, 1999), and Canada (Randall & Byers, 2003). In the majority of these studies, participants were presented with a variation of the question "would you say you had sex if the most intimate behavior you engaged in was..." and were asked to respond with a yes or no to a list of sexual behaviours (e.g., Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Richters & Song, 1999; Sanders

& Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010). For the studies in which sexual orientation was identified, over ninety-five percent of participants identified as heterosexual (Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Richters & Song, 1999; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). In one study, participants were asked to consider whether hypothetical characters would consider different sexual behaviours as sex in order to reduce participants' anxieties about revealing their own beliefs about sex (Bogart et al., 2000). Almost all participants across studies considered penile-vaginal intercourse to count as sex, followed by anal intercourse (around 70-80% of participants). Participants were more ambivalent and less consistent about counting oral sex as 'sex' (25-58%) and even fewer considered touching and other masturbatory behaviors as sex (2-30%). Additionally, Randall and Byers (2003) noted that participants were more likely to label a sexual activity as 'sex' if orgasm occurred. It is evident overall that individuals have differing interpretations of what counts as sex and further that contextual factors (e.g., occurrence of orgasm) may influence one's perception of these experiences. Yet, explorations of *why* and *how* people come to label certain sexual experiences as 'sex' are largely absent. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007b) call attention to the scarcity of research concerning definitions of sex and note that studies in the area are limited to giving participants a list of behaviours and asking them to note which they would label as sex (e.g., Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Richters & Song, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010) or by asking them to determine whether or not hypothetical scenarios between characters count as sex (Bogart et al., 2000). Absent in these studies is room for participants' ambivalence regarding what constitutes sex. In order to address this gap, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007b) sought to explore why participants did not label certain sexual activities as sex by inviting participants to think of experiences of "almost but not quite sex" and "just barely sex". Although individuals had varied definitions of sex, the most

common reason that sexual activity was not considered sex was because intercourse had not occurred (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007b). Still missing are qualitative explorations that allow participants the space to discursively construct their perceptions and experiences of sex. How do participants make meaning of *their own* sexual experiences? What determines whether or not an individual counts a specific act as ‘sex’? Addressing the paucity of qualitative research surrounding definitions and understandings of sex is important in terms of encouraging alternative discursive spaces whereby women are able to speak freely of their own sexual experiences that may or may not follow the dominant script of heterosex.

For example, Hirst (2004) conducted interviews to explore young women and men’s (aged 15-16 years old) sexual attitudes and how they conceptualized their sexual experiences. She found that participants referred to intercourse as ‘proper sex’ and spoke of feeling abnormal for enjoying other kinds of sex (see Hirst, 2004; 2013). That is, the interviewed young women described penile-vaginal intercourse using terms such as ‘real sex’, ‘doing it properly’, and ‘going all the way’ (Hirst, 2004). Notably, the individuals who described intercourse in this way reported that they had not yet engaged in intercourse as they preferred other types of sexual activities they were engaging in, yet were concerned about being abnormal and felt pressured to ‘go all the way’ (i.e., have sexual intercourse) (Hirst, 2013). In this way, sexual experiences are dictated by these rules of what is considered ‘proper’, where all other forms of sex are ‘improper’, and therefore eclipsed by dominant constructions of sex. What are the consequences of treating any sexual experience except intercourse as ‘other’?

In her research on sexual satisfaction, Sara McClelland (2010) highlights the need for research methods that consider conceptualizations of sexual practices in a broader context. She argues that, “what counts as low and high sexual satisfaction is essential to understand if we are

to understand how participants are interpreting items. It is also important to understand how item responses relate to the social and political conditions of individuals” (p. 674). The common practice of assessing sexual satisfaction using Likert scale ratings in research threatens to obscure inequities as it is assumed that all participants have the same baseline expectation of what sexual satisfaction means. Further, the socio-political conditions of individuals are largely underexplored and thus not taken into account in research on sexual satisfaction. On an individual level, ‘intimate justice’ calls not only for freedom from coercion and harm, but an entitlement to sexual pleasure and satisfaction. On a methodological level, McClelland (2010) recommends that researchers adopt an ‘intimate justice’ approach when researching individual sexual lives by applying methodological practices that consider socio-political inequalities and explore the question of sexual satisfaction from this lens so that what people say they want sexually (e.g., on a Likert scale) and what people internalize via societal norms are not conflated. Echoing Foucault’s theorizing on sex as a social capital, she contends that socio-political constraints are often obscured when we study intimate experiences on an individual level and “intimate matters are often seen as the ultimate expression of selfhood” (p. 672). The conceptual deployment of intimate justice invites “the socio-political conditions of sexual development, psychological self-evaluation processes, and norms concerning the distribution of justice” (p. 673) to the centerstage. In line with her apt argument, it appears essential then, that we understand what people count as sex, and how these understandings are tethered to social and political contexts, in order to gain deeper insight into how people understand and ascribe meaning to their own sexual experiences. The aforementioned studies on what counts as sex provide important, albeit limited information, in terms of what people count as ‘sex’. This diffuse positioning of intercourse as synonymous with sex is intimately linked to dominant

discourses of heterosex, which operate from a phallocentric perspective where the phallus typically denotes patriarchal power and privilege (Grosz, 1990). In order to identify how women understand and conceptualize sexual experiences, it is crucial to go beyond individualized frameworks and to explore the cultural contexts and discursive constructions in which these assumptions are situated (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008).

### **Sexually Liberated or Liable?: Agency and the Postfeminist Woman**

Hollway (1989) identified three dominant discourses of sexuality that shape societal norms and influence (hetero)sexual relationships: the *male sexual drive discourse*, the *have/hold discourse*, and the *permissive discourse*. The *male sexual drive discourse* emerged from a biological essentialist perspective in which men are supposed to be biologically driven to *need* sex in order to satisfy an insatiable and unstoppable desire (Beres & Farvid, 2010). In this way, men maintain a dominant position as pursuers of women's bodies and women are passively positioned as the object of male sexual desire. This discourse reinforces and perpetuates the notion that a man's sexual desire is active whereas a woman's is passive. The *have/hold discourse*, commonly invoked in the 1950s to produce norms surrounding women's expected sexual behaviour, posits that sex should occur solely within a long-term and monogamous relationship (Hollway, 1989). Finally, the *permissive discourse* challenges the notion of monogamy and offers a more liberal sexual practice for women, who are encouraged to express their sexuality however they desire. However, this discourse is nonetheless closely related to the male sexual drive discourse in that male desire remains central, and it is through these discourses that a restrictive set of phallocentric discourses are made available to women in which male sexual pleasure is prioritized (Potts, 2000).



Furthering the permissive discourse, the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s saw the encouragement of female sexual empowerment by supposedly freeing women from gendered power imbalances. Whereas female sexuality has long been argued to be shaped by a ‘missing discourse of desire’ (Fine 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006), postfeminist and neoliberal notions of freedom and choice have encouraged an active and desiring sexual woman (Gill 2007; 2009) who is expected to perpetually be sexually prepared, proficient, and practicing (Gurevich et al., 2017). The emergence of neoliberal (e.g., autonomy, free choice) and postfeminist (e.g., personal empowerment, transcending gender equality) ideologies into the intimate sphere has “heralded a re-conceptualization of sex and the construction of a new sexual actor” (Frith, 2015a, p. 19) where sex, rather than being designated as ‘natural’, is positioned as ‘work’ that is subject to improvement (through knowledge and skill) (e.g., Frith, 2013a; Gill, 2009). Neoliberalism refers to a mode of governmentality that operates across various social structures where individuals are constructed as self-regulating and autonomous beings who operate independently from any external societal pressures or ideals (Rose, 1990; 1996; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Meoldy, 2001). The power and politics of the neoliberal state are enacted onto the self as individual activities are framed in terms of freedoms and interests (Harvey, 2005) and individual choices are painted as deliberate acts free from sociocultural constraints. The neoliberal subject is engaged in a self-actualizing project and all of one’s practices (Gill gives the example of surgical breast augmentation and liposuction) are understood via discourses of “pleasing oneself” and “feeling good about oneself” (Gill, 2008a). Gill (2008a) refers to this occlusion of power relations behind a neoliberal veil as a “postfeminist sensibility”. The relationship between subjectivity and sociocultural context are overlooked in the neoliberal paradigm (Gill, 2008a) which, along with postfeminist models, has enjoined a shift from sexual objectification to

“subjectification”. At this intersection of neoliberal and postfeminist undertones, sexual pleasure has been repackaged as a goal that can be *worked toward* and ultimately *achieved* (Frith, 2015a; Gill, 2009). Gill (2009) notes that women’s advice magazines, for example, position women as ‘intimate entrepreneurs’ by deploying discourses of management and entrepreneurship to describe how women navigate their intimate lives. That is, women are encouraged to take control of their sexual lives, yet are regulating body image and learning how to please men in order to work toward the traditional goal of a relationship. McRobbie (2007) refers to this masquerade as a new ‘sexual contract’, where women are encouraged to be hyper-active in terms of education, employment and fertility under the postfeminist guise of equality. Regulation is reframed in terms of what women *ought* to do rather than what they ought *not* do. The practices (e.g., education, employment) that women are encouraged to engage in illuminate this postfeminist paradox as they are “both progressive but also consummately and reassuringly feminine” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 721). McRobbie (2007) postulates that this masquerade ironically does the very thing that feminism strives to undo—it fortifies patriarchal power and resituates women in the gender hierarchy as complying with traditional feminine ideals (e.g., wearing makeup and heels). In this way, societal coercion is concealed and compliance with traditional feminine roles is repackaged as woman’s choice (Baker, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Indeed, this alternative view of female sexuality is rife with contradictions. Burkett and Hamilton (2012) call attention to the problematic nature of this neoliberal imperative by highlighting that “contemporary sexual agency underscores an awkward blend of feminist and anti-feminist elements in which women view themselves as empowered yet continue to reproduce the terms of sexuality set by heteronormative discourses” (p. 817). Further, the

individuality invoked by neoliberalism has led to an alienation from collectivism and has framed societal issues (e.g., sexual and body image ideals) as individual choices (Rich, 1980). Although women are ostensibly no longer responsible for ensuring that the insatiable male sex drive is satisfied (see “male sexual drive discourse”, Hollway, 1989) this common invocation of a rhetoric of choice once again positions women as gatekeepers of sex (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012). In our current cultural climate of (ostensible) sexual freedom and liberation, women become responsible for attending to their own desires while also managing sexual negotiations (see Gill, 2009). That is, women are seen as active pursuers of sex who are encouraged not only to engage in sex but to actively enjoy it as well (Beres & Farvid, 2010). Any invitation for sex is positioned as a choice and from this view the woman’s role is to either agree to or refuse sex (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012). This is where consent becomes a precarious concept: If women are seen as having the agency and control to say either “yes” or “no”, then yes *must* mean yes, and no *must* mean no. In this way, ambivalence is not legible to the postfeminist reader. The problem here is that either/or positions, which have peppered our history of sexual constructions, yet again subscribe to the detrimental and binding nature of the binary. Simplifying experiences into binaries “can create considerable limitations for individuals attempting to story complex experiences” (McKenzie-Mohr, 2013, p. 141).

Although the aforementioned dominant discourses of heterosex are continually (re)constructed, the notion of a biologically driven male dominant sexuality as ‘natural’ and central remains salient. In fact, human sexuality textbooks continue to organize around a biological essentialism approach and subsequently minimize the influence of social and political factors in the construction and dissemination of knowledge (Stelzl & Stairs, 2014). While these discourses have been repackaged and interwoven with threads of agency and female sexual

empowerment (see Beres & Farvid, 2010), they nonetheless continue to offer women phallocentric subjectivities to take up where male pleasure remains the priority (Potts, 2000).

It is important not to equate the relatively newly afforded female agency with the eradication of gendered power imbalances. The assumption that power operates from a duality of either domination or subordination breeds detrimental assumptions about the liberation and exchange of power (Allen, 2003). In the neoliberal domain, power is not absent, but rather power operates through the self in the form of self-surveillance and regulation toward achieving goals that are internally imposed (Frith, 2015a). This view draws on Foucault's notion of the *panopticon*, in which power is not a specific institutional force, but is dispersed and operates ubiquitously to keep individuals under constant surveillance (Foucault, 1975; 1978). Foucault (1975) argues that power has evolved and shifted from the sovereign power of pre-industrial societies where power operated as a top-down process from ruler to the people, to a disciplinary form of power where power operates as a network that is constantly monitoring individuals and enforcing a bodily discipline that requires perpetual self-surveillance and work in order to achieve normality. In this way, "power is [both] external to the subject and the very venue of the subject" (Butler, 1997, p. 15). Power is something that acts *on* rather than is acted *by* the subject; where the body is at the very center of this power network, power shapes subjectivity and also identity categories. Subjectivity cannot exist without power, and yet in becoming a subject one "becomes heralded as the subject who *founds* power" (Butler, 1997, p.16). When an individual inhabits an agentic subject position, power is adopted through a process of appropriation, however power remains tied to the conditions of the institution (i.e., social and cultural context). Thus, when we assume that subverting male power has created an equal space for women, we are ignoring the complex negotiations that continue to operate and oppress

women in more subtle and creative ways. In the context of gender relations to power, the misconception that the sexual liberation brought forth complete gender equality threatens to mask ongoing subordination (see Bay-Cheng, 2015). As Allen (2003) aptly argues, “male power in heterosexual relationships is not simply monolithic nor sufficiently vulnerable to subversion to render it unstable. Rather it suggests that while male power is pervasive in some form, it is simultaneously contested and negotiated in ways which affords women a measure of agency” (p. 235).

Accordingly, neoliberal notions of sexual liberation may be counterproductively striving for a cultural impossibility. It is clear that hegemonic phallocentric discourses are harmful by painting women as passive sexual beings whose role it is to satisfy insatiable male sexual desire. In contrast, at the other end of the spectrum, notions of agency and empowerment have stifled the possibility of a woman being victimized in any but the most extreme context of violent rape, as her engagement in sexual activity is always seen as a choice (Baker, 2008; 2010), and negative experiences are constructed as ‘bad choices’ (Jackson & Scott, 2002). This supposed liberation from the oppressive societal hold have left women liable.

### **Negotiating (Non)Consent and (Non)Desire**

Sexual activity has been traditionally conceptualized as fitting a dichotomous model that conflates consenting and wanting (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007a). The dominant model of consent conceptualizes sex as either consensual and wanted, or nonconsensual and unwanted. Wanting refers to an internal desire to engage in sex, differing from consent which refers to an external expression of agreement (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007a; Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010). According to this model, experiences of consensual yet unwanted sex or nonconsensual yet wanted sex are conceptually impossible. In contrast to this

uni-dimensional framework, recent research has demonstrated that consenting and wanting are in fact two distinct, albeit interacting, concepts (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007a). Despite the knowledge that consent and wantedness are intimately intertwined, (non)consent continues to be seen as the defining factor in what constitutes sexual violence and in education efforts for sexual violence prevention (Beres, 2007).

Consent has been central to discussions of sexual violence and prevention efforts. Definitions of consent, however, are rarely clearly outlined and are instead assumed to be understood by researchers and the general public (Beres, 2007). In a literature review exploring definitions of consent, Beres (2007) exposes the problematic lack of agreed upon definition of consent. Rather, researchers rely on an implicit and ‘spontaneous’ (see Bourdieu et al., 1991) definition that is supposed to be common knowledge yet is left open to interpretation. That is, although consent is a concept that has often been explored in research, many scholars have failed to define this term while others have used varying (and sometimes conflicting) definitions. For example, consent has been defined in terms of a physical act, a mental act, and an act of moral transformation where an illegal activity (i.e., nonconsensual sex) becomes a morally permissible one. The either absent or inconsistent definition has left readers to rely on assumed definitions. Beres (2007) argues that many of these understandings of consent neglect an exploration of how dominant heterosexual discourses impact the ways in which we understand and consequently communicate consent with partners. In fact, current definitions and understandings of consent may be discordant with how individuals enact the concept in their sexual relationships (Beres, 2014). For example, Beres (2014) conducted two studies exploring how young adults negotiate sexual experiences and define sexual consent in both casual and long-term relationships and found that many participants articulated that consent did not always indicate wanting to engage

in sex and further that consent was not always relevant to long-term relationship contexts. This is not to suggest that assessing a partner's willingness to engage in sex is not present and important—the way in which they described their experiences would absolutely fit within the legal definition of consensual sex. Instead, what their comments highlight is the difference between communicating a *willingness* to engage in sex and *consenting* to sex or *wanting* sex. Thus, Beres disclaims that it is important to consider the distinction between the term consent and the concept, as the concept does not adequately capture the complexities of how consenting is negotiated in practice.

Consent has been commonly described as a dividing boundary line between what is and what is not considered to be sexual assault, yet where exactly this boundary falls remains ambiguous. According to the Criminal Code of Canada, “consent is the critical issue in many sexual assault crimes”. Definitions “influence what behaviours are considered unacceptable—worthy of public condemnation, research, and legislative action—and what behaviours are considered acceptable and normal” (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999, p. 243). Given that the legal system holds a high authority, legal understandings of concepts such as sexual assault infiltrate public consciousness. Thus, when definitions of sexual violence are centered on consent, consent becomes the marker of what is deemed to be acceptable sex (i.e., not sexual violence) (Beres, 2007). In this way, experiences of sex that are technically consensual, albeit unwanted and highly problematic, get passed off as ‘acceptable’. Although Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007a) call attention to this, their quadrant approach nonetheless demonstrates that experiences of consensual but unwanted sex are most often framed as “not rape”. If negative and pressured sexual experiences are not commonly labeled as sexual assault (e.g., Thomas, Stelzl, & Lafrance, 2016), what language is being used to describe these troubling sexual experiences?

Sexual violence prevention campaigns have been largely centered on consent. Where campaigns were once fueled by the slogan “just say no” (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999) which typified a risk avoidance approach, the acknowledgement that this tactic invokes a rhetoric of victim blaming has led to an affirmative model of consent in which people are encouraged to actively obtain a yes from their partner. For example, campaigns such as “consent is sexy” and “yes means yes” (see Lafrance, Loe, & Brown, 2012) aim to encourage communication between partners, to ensure that both partners are enthusiastically agreeing to engage in sex. From an initial glance these campaigns appear wholly positive, however, they are once again centered solely on consent and do not acknowledge the fact that people may engage in sex, perhaps even with an ‘enthusiastic yes’, despite not wanting to. Again, the focus here is on communication and not corporeality. If consent is a communication between partners to obtain an agreement to engage in sex, then desire is the underlying wish to give consent, to want to engage in sex. However, an emphasis on consent inadvertently further masks desire, as here consent is assumed to also mean desire. Additionally, it is important to consider that desire does not always arise from the body, but can form in relation to a prescriptive compulsory heterosexuality where women are supposed to desire sex with men (Butler, 1990). Here, desire is positioned in terms of a desire to *please* rather than a desire for *pleasure*. Despite postfeminist notions that women are independently agentic and are free to either engage in or to refuse sex, women have expressed difficulty in negotiating consent in their own sexual interactions and thus engaging in sex without desire is a common experience (e.g., Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998).

### **Unblurring the Lines: Acknowledging Unwanted (Consensual) Sex as Problematic**



Women report consenting to unwanted sex for various reasons, including the desire to meet their partners' sexual needs, to maintain the relationship (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012), and in more extreme cases, to evade possible violence (e.g., Basile, 1999). Although not rape in the legal sense, experiences of unwanted sex may still have a negative emotional and physiological impact on the individual (Walker, 1997). Thus, do we necessarily need the language and legal status of rape in order to acknowledge and bring these ideas into public discussions? If sex without consent is sexual assault, then what is sex without desire? Gavey (2005) argues that commonplace and taken for granted forms of heterosexuality—for example competing popular culture messages about women as both objects of male desire and as sexual agents—structure a 'cultural scaffolding of rape'. This refers to "the discourses of sex and gender that produce forms of heterosex that set up the preconditions for rape—women's passive, acquiescing (a)sexuality and men's forthright, urgent pursuit of the "release"" (Gavey, 2005, p. 3). She warns against the interpretation that normative heterosex is in any way similar to rape but rather asserts that the line between these two possibilities is not so clear in instances that are not mutually consensual and desired. That is, experiences that do not neatly meet the acknowledged definition of rape may be dismissed as merely 'bad sex' (see Gavey, 2005) using the same language women draw on to describe experiences that are desired yet not pleasurable (Thomas et al., 2016). This is the perfect example of how our neoliberal ideals fail us as 'rape' gets repackaged as normative heterosex. Gavey (2005) explores women's experiences of unwanted sex, in particular occasions where women did not feel that they had the choice to say no. In her interviews, women spoke of sexual experiences that they did not desire nor did they find pleasurable. In many instances, there was no direct pressure from one's partner to engage in sex, but rather a more indirect social pressure to comply with sexual norms (e.g.,

that sex should occur within a relationship). These widely understood norms are reflective of the dominant discourses of heterosex, described above, which position women as responsible for satisfying male desire and thus many unwanted sexual experiences, especially where consent was given, are masked as normative sex and further obscure ongoing unequal power relations (see also Baker, 2008). Thomas and colleagues (2016) heard similar accounts in a study exploring women's experiences of feigning sexual pleasure. Notably, all interviewed women spoke explicitly of at least one troubling or 'bad' sexual encounter despite having been recruited to talk about experiences of consensual sex. Yet, none of the interviewed women used explicit language to trouble problematic sex and instead employed various distancing discursive techniques (e.g., disclaimer language, hedging, negation) to point to negative sexual experiences. Faking orgasm emerged as an agentic practice where women had control over ending a sexual encounter where there were no other available options (e.g., refusing sex was positioned as implausible). Thus, it is important for clinicians, researchers and activists to be aware of this and to attune their ears to alternative ways of troubling negative sexual experiences where available language fails.

McKenzie-Mohr (2013) posits that there are two dominant narratives of rape in the West: the 'trauma of rape' discourse and the 'negate or blame' discourse. The latter is arguably dominant when troubling experiences of unwanted sex are passed off discursively as 'just sex' and are minimized to avoid individual blame for 'letting' unwanted sex happen. The discourse of 'negate or blame' renders any experiences outside of the limited discourse for 'legitimate rape' (i.e. violent rape by a stranger, see Wood & Rennie, 1994) as illegitimate. That is, these 'other' experiences of rape are positioned as 'just sex' (Gavey, 2005) where women are blamed for engaging in unwanted sex through the discourse of agentic individualism. Outside of

experiences of sexual assault that match the “Hollywood rape script” (Wood & Rennie, 1994), women may have difficulty labeling other negative experiences as sexual assault, especially in a culture where legality dominates over morality. That is, legal discourses are often invoked when talking about sexual violence to a point that individual experiences of rape are determined to be legitimate or not based on legal definitions. In this way, other forms of sexual violence become almost normative; it is culturally accepted and even inadvertently advertised.

With regards to labeling experiences of sexual assault, Harned (2005) found that women who had experienced unwanted sex where they had explicitly expressed non-consent were more likely to label their experience as sexual assault than those who felt they had not adequately expressed their non-consent. That is, women who felt that they ‘gave in’ to coercion and engaged in unwanted sex were less likely to explicitly label their experience of unwanted sex. Here again, consent appears to be salient not only in legal definitions of sexual assault, but in how women understand and label their own negative sexual experiences. Furthermore, some women did not label their unwanted sexual experiences because they considered it to be “just typical heterosexual dating behavior” (Harned, 2005, p. 408). Where consent provides a dominant language, experiences that fall outside the realm of explicitly consensual or non-consensual are often unheard and passed off as “just sex” (Gavey, 2005) or further, “bad sex” (Thomas et al., 2016).

### **Current Research**

In the realm of sexuality, there appear to be many taken-for-granted or ‘spontaneous’ definitions (Beres, 2007; Bourdieu et al., 1991), which have accrued common sense status. For example, ideas about what is considered to be ‘sex’ and further what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex have implicit meanings that are assumed in media representations, sex education, and even in

research (e.g., Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Given the paucity of qualitative literature exploring what exactly these definitions *mean* to women, the current research aims to explore these taken-for-granted terms: What is sex? Why is sexual intercourse positioned as *the* pinnacle of sexual experience? What does it mean to have good sex; to have bad sex? What does good sex feel like? How do women talk about negative sexual experiences that they may not explicitly label as rape or sexual assault? What language exists to bring lived and troubling experiences into being in our current cultural vernacular? Where does language enable and where does it fail?

Scholars have suggested that the cultivation of alternative discourses of female sexual desire (Farvid, 2013) is necessary not only to “stop the worst of bad sex” but to call for a reconceptualization of what constitutes *good* sex (Beres, Senn, & McCaw, 2014, p. 774). Furthermore, exploring how women conceptualize sex may have important implications for how we understand consent as “consent may inform people’s notions of what ‘counts’ as sex” (Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014, p. 514). In the context of anal sex, for example, Fahs and Gonzalez (2014) wonder “if someone does not “finish” or ejaculate during anal sex, and renegotiates consent, does that mean they ever had anal sex?”. In terms of sexual violence, where we rely largely on negotiations of consent to determine what is considered to be ‘acceptable’ sex (Beres, 2007), what are the rules for other experiences that are not considered to be ‘real sex’? If oral sex is not considered to be ‘real’ sex, then are negative experiences of oral sex heard and given the same meaning as negative experiences of sexual intercourse? Which negative sexual experiences are trivialized or discounted? Where (non)consent is seen as the defining factor in what constitutes sexual violence and that education efforts often center on teaching consent (Beres, 2007), the interviewed women may identify alternative ways of accounting for (dis)pleasure and (non)desire which may in turn inform future sex education efforts. Given the considerable

disparity between media and mainstream cultural representations of female sexuality and women's embodied sexual experiences, this research aims to explore women's discursive constructions of their own sexual experiences as they choose to define them. That is, this thesis explores how women define sex, describe experiences of good and bad sex, and negotiate consent and desire in practice, including unwanted sexual experiences that may not meet legal definitions of sexual assault based on consent, in order to encourage clinicians, educators, and allies to listen beyond explicit labels and to productively disrupt the dominant dialogues of normative sexuality.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

There has been debate in the literature as to what is an appropriate sample size in qualitative research (e.g., Baker & Edwards, 2012), and guidelines vary by methodological and analytic approach (e.g. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis vs. Discourse Analysis). The general consensus is that enough interviews should be conducted in order to reach theoretical *saturation*, which occurs when data collection no longer offers any new insights. There is no definitive answer as to what that number is, although between 12 and 30 interviews is typically considered adequate to reach saturation and redundancy (Dworkin, 2012; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). In accordance with these guidelines, participants for this study were 24 women aged 18-35 ( $M=22.4$ ,  $SD=5.04$ ) years who were invited to talk about sex and their sexual practices broadly. Participants were diverse in terms of sexual orientation and ethnic background. Participants self-identified as heterosexual ( $n=15$ ), heterosexual but open to same-sex relationships ( $n=2$ ), bisexual ( $n=4$ ), pansexual ( $n=1$ ), and queer ( $n=2$ ). There was variability in participants' self-identified ethno-cultural background, reflective of the urban Canadian context in which this research was conducted (see Appendix A). At the time of the interview, 2 participants were married, 10 were in relationships lasting one year or longer, 6 were in relationships lasting less than a year, and 6 identified as single. Of the participants who were in a relationship, all were in relationships with men except for one participant (P15) who was in a relationship with a trans woman.

The language for recruitment was left intentionally vague, inviting women to talk about “sex” broadly, rather than employing a common language to recruit women who are “sexually active”. Terms like “sex” and “sexual practices” were deliberately left undefined. Given that

one of the main questions of this research is how women define sex and what they ‘count’ as sex, indirect questioning may facilitate the uncovering of “under-researched cultural constructs” (Farvid, 2010, p. 236). As Farvid (2010) notes, language choice in recruitment is key as it may have implications for the types of stories people tell. Thus, I chose to recruit participants broadly to speak about sex and sexual practices as consistent with discursive analysis (discussed in detail below). I was interested in how women described their own experiences rather than making generalizations about sexual norms.

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Ryerson Research Ethics Board. Participants were recruited through posters advertised online (Craigslist, Kijiji, Facebook) and posters affixed across the Ryerson campus. Posters included a brief description of the study, the study inclusion criteria, and the investigator’s contact information. Interested individuals were contacted via e-mail and were provided with a more detailed description of the study. Participants were screened for their age, gender, and ability to speak English for the purposes of the interview; no other pre-screening questions were asked. The study was also advertised through the Ryerson SONA research pool, which is an online system used to recruit undergraduate students in Introductory Psychology courses to participate in research for course credit. Participants were also screened for gender, age, and language ability through the online system. Fifteen participants were recruited through the community and 9 participants were recruited through the SONA system. All interested and eligible women were invited to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interview that lasted from 1-2 hours. Skype and telephone interviews were also available to facilitate maximal participation access although all 24 participants opted to participate in an in-person interview.

The interview schedule addressed the following domains: sex and sexual practices, talking about sex with others, experiences of good and bad sex, consent, and negotiating desire (see Appendix B). The interview questions were scripted yet open-ended to allow for participants' diverse and unique experiences. Follow-up questions were conversational in order to encourage participants to talk freely about what emerges as most important for them. At the commencement of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to read the consent form and ask any questions. After obtaining participants' consent, each interview was audiotaped and transcribed using an orthographic style where all words and other features of talk such as laughter, pauses, and emphasis were transcribed verbatim (see Appendix C for transcript notation). Participants recruited online (Craigslist, Kijiji, and Facebook) and through posters on campus were entered into a draw to win one of two CAD\$75 cash prizes as compensation. Students recruited through the online system received two credits toward their Introduction to Psychology course research participant requirement. At the conclusion of the interviews, all participants engaged in a debriefing process. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions and were provided with a resource list containing contact information for mental health and sexual health resources.

### **Theoretical Lens and Analytic Approach**

Interviews were analyzed using a discourse analytic technique (e.g., Weatherall, 2002; Wood & Kroger, 2000) drawing from critical and feminist poststructuralist theory. Weedon (1987) describes feminist poststructuralism as “a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (pp. 40-41). That is, our understandings and expressions of experiences cannot exist independently from language, and



other symbolic systems, and are largely reflective of the social, cultural and political ideals of the time in which they are situated (Burr, 2003; Gavey, 1989). Women's experiences are not seen as universal in this view, but rather are understood as constituted by language reflective of a particular time (Gavey, 1989). From a poststructuralist standpoint, "language has no inherent essential meaning" (Weedon, 1987, p. 34). Discourse analysis rejects the notion that 'truths' can exist without discourse (Gavey, 1992), and thus, different from many other epistemological standpoints, the goal of discourse analysis is not to uncover underlying truths, but to explore the ways in which language is reciprocally shaped by knowledge and power.

Discourses are patterns of meanings or sets of assumptions that shape our understanding of a particular event and provide us with common understandings of the world (Burr, 2003). Discourses are multiple, and often competing, and thus there are numerous ways for any given phenomenon to be understood and expressed through language. Foucault's notion of discourse assumes that knowledge is *produced* through discourse (Foucault, 1978). That is, language is a vehicle for knowledge transmission rather than a site of knowledge production itself. The power to take up a certain subject position or to construct experience in any particular way depends on the presence of knowledges (or discourses) available in a given social, cultural, and political locale. In this way, power is "an effect of discourse" (Burr, 2003, p. 68) and is most effective when it creates and maintains social structures and practices. Dominant discourses are adopted by the majority of people and often garner common-sense meanings. Although they appear to be neutral and natural, dominant discourses serve to perpetuate existing power relations (Gavey, 1989). Thus, discourses do not represent any tangible truth, but rather reflect the dominant ideologies of a particular time and place.

For this analysis, I drew on both critical discursive psychology and poststructuralist/Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis. Where these methods of discourse analysis were once configured as distinct approaches rooted in different theoretical camps, it has been argued that a more eclectic approach to discourse analysis “better captures the paradoxical relationship that exists between discourse and the speaking subject” (Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Wetherell & Edley, 1999, p. 338). Critical discursive psychology is a fine-grained approach that is concerned with *how* people use language to negotiate social interactions (Willig, 2001). In this tradition, discourse is action oriented and thus discourse analysis focuses on what talk is *doing* and *achieving* (Wood & Kroger, 2000). As Wetherell and Edley (2014) highlight in their work on hegemonic masculinity, discursive psychology is concerned with how gendered identities are constructed and negotiated in relation to one’s other identities. Gender identity is not viewed as a stable entity waiting to be exposed; rather the speaking subject constructs identity through the (re)iteration of and resistance to varying narratives and interactions. In this way, gender identity is informed by available discourses and the way they are co-opted and performed by the speaker. Foucauldian discourse analysis draws on Foucault’s notion of knowledge/power as well as poststructuralist and psychoanalytic perspectives. In particular, it operates under the assumption that language is reflective of the social and historical context, and evolves as context shifts (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). Thus, similarly to critical discourse analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis is concerned with how hegemonic discourses stem from dominant power structures. This approach differs, however, in that it assumes that discourses produce “subject positions” that are organized by the institution and have implications for how individuals experience the world. Thus, language is not actively constructed, but largely reflective of historical ideology. Given that I am interested in exploring both *how* women use

available language to negotiate their sexual experiences as well as how dominant constructions of sexuality *shape* experience more broadly, the amalgamation of both aforementioned approaches proffers a more holistic interpretation.

Wood and Kroger's (2000) model of discourse analysis guided the approach. This synthetic approach views individuals as active subjects who have some flexibility in choosing which discourses to adopt (Gavey, 1989), while at the same time acknowledging that the available categories are socially constructed (Wood & Kroger, 2000). In this framework, discourse analysis seeks to "identify the ways in which participants themselves actively construct and employ categories in their talk" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 29) and to question, rather than take for granted, the nature of such categories. Analysis involved the repeated and careful reading of the texts in order to identify patterns in participants' talk. Attention was paid both to what is said, and what is absent from participants' language. Codes were assigned to emerging themes and data was organized using these codes to explore how discourse is structured and what effects emerge as consequences of speech. A more focused coding guide was then created where emerging patterns of talk were extracted and analyzed for instances in which similarities and differences materialized within and across interviews, in what contexts these discourses emerged, and how these ways of speaking both limit and facilitate participants' meaning making practices. Finally, according to the fine-grained approach encapsulated by critical discourse analysis, attention was paid to specific features of talk and common turns of phrases that were verbalized across participants and used to convey meaning beyond the literal structure of language. These processes were often complex and fraught with negotiations as participants reiterated, resisted, and revised existing hegemonic categories.

One of the central tenets of a feminist poststructuralist approach is a critique of the phenomenological assumptions that mainstream psychology research adopts and to explore alternative standpoints from which women may make sense of their lived experiences (Ussher, 1999). Feminist sociologist Marjorie DeVault (1990) contends that language often fails to adequately represent women's lived experience and thus "women who want to talk of their experience must 'translate', either by saying things that are not quite right" (p. 97) or "saying part of what is experienced, groping for words, doing the best one can" (p. 102). Through a careful and nuanced examination of women's talk, I identify core features of this talk and explore the ways in which available language surrounding sexuality, sex, pleasure, consent, and desire both enables and constrains women's lived and embodied experiences, and how these constructions are reciprocally influenced by the current cultural context in which they originate.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

In the first section of the analysis, I explore three central discourses that emerged in participants negotiations of what counts as sex: 1) the ‘sex just happens’ discourse in which women describe sex as inevitable and uncontrollable, 2) the ‘sex ends when he comes’ discourse in which male orgasm is positioned as the primary way in which sex ends and 3) the ‘(re)counting differently’ discourse in which dominant constructions are challenged. The following section examines participants’ talk of ‘good’ sex which is organized in terms of physical pleasure and emotional connection, and communication, comfort and consent. Next, participants’ accounts of ‘bad’ sex and the way available language is used to construct these accounts is explored. In particular, participants used the term ‘bad’ to highlight a range of experiences— from sex that was unpleasurable to sex that was unwanted and painful. Participants describe the reasons why it is easier to engage in ‘bad’ sex than to refuse it, how feigning sexual pleasure facilitates finishing (i.e., male orgasm) and the societal pressures that create the conditions where bad sex becomes normative. Finally, I explore the ways in which participants negotiate consent and desire within their sexual relationships, including accounts of agreeing to sex that was unwanted. Here, participants routinely mobilized competing discourses of ‘relationship as compromise’ and ‘navigating neoliberal choice’, and negotiated the presence and absence of their own desires. Notably, these ways of accounting were often overlapping and contradictory. Throughout the analysis, attention is paid to what participants are saying as well as the language used to describe these concepts. For each section, an analysis of the transcripts is followed by a broader discussion about how this study is implicated in a broader societal context.

## **What's Your Number?: Women's Accounts of What 'Counts' as Sex**

The data were analyzed to explore the types of sexual activities that participants 'count' as sex as well as the sexual activities that are excluded from this construction. Attention was paid to what types of sexual experiences are privileged over others and why participants understand their experiences in these ways. Dominant constructions of heterosex were both recapitulated and resisted within and across participants' accounts. Participants frequently mobilized a discourse of sex as something that invariably 'just happens' while at the same time deconstructing and questioning what they recognized as taken-for-granted definitions (privileging heteronormativity). Most often, 'sex' was treated as synonymous with penile-vaginal intercourse in the context of heterosex. Exceptions to this conception were most commonly made in the context of same-sex sexual interactions<sup>1</sup>. Participants who have had sexual experiences with both men and women frequently describe these experiences differently and note that their conceptualization of which sexual activities count as 'sex' vary depending on the gender of their sexual partner. Each of these emergent patterns of talk will be unpacked in the following sections of analysis.

**"[Sex] just happens": Differing preferred and practiced progressions.** Participants' negotiations of what is and is not sex operate within heteronormative strictures. Heteronormativity organizes norms about sexuality, positioning sex acts within the progression of sex as natural and commonsensical. In line with Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips (2003), most participants describe the typical progression of sex during a heterosexual encounter as beginning

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<sup>1</sup> While seven participants have had sexual experiences with women, these were not referenced in the context of talking about bad or unwanted sex. Further, most women described their experiences with women as variable and context-dependent. While same-sex experiences will be described briefly in this section, the majority of this analysis centers on heterosex. Women's same-sex experiences will be explored in detail in a subsequent publication.

with foreplay, which typically includes kissing, touching, and oral sex. In the vast majority of constructions, sex ultimately culminates in penile-vaginal intercourse and is framed as something that “just happens”. Indeed, participants often referenced penile-vaginal intercourse as ‘actual’ or ‘real’ sex (see also Hirst, 2004; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001).

In describing what ‘counts’ as sex, the most common definition is equating sex with penetration. As Participant 10 (20<sup>2</sup>, Bisexual) says, sex is “the most that you can do” with someone. With men, she describes intercourse as the only sexual act that counts as sex. However she notes, given that penile-vaginal sex between women is not possible, oral sex is the equivalent to “the most that you can do” with women (“oral sex is the ultimate thing that would be equivalent to penetrative sex with men”). It appears then as if the definition of ‘sex’ is based on the final (or “ultimate”) activity in the sexual hierarchy rather than the act of penetration itself. In a similar vein, Participant 19 (18, Straight) notes that she exclusively considers penile-vaginal intercourse to count as sex but acknowledges that others may consider oral sex as ‘sex’ if their religious or cultural beliefs prohibit them from having “actual” sex. In this conceptualization, oral sex achieves status as the “most you can do” while still respecting religious boundaries. Echoing Participant 19’s construction of sex as imbued with religious beliefs, Participant 20 (22, Straight) describes oral sex as something that is “forgiveable” and “just pleasurable”, whereas intercourse has greater physical (“you pop your cherry”) and emotional (“it’s more a deeper connection”) costs. Implicit in these definitions is the notion that there is a well known hierarchy that privileges certain activities over others. This taken for granted definition implies a common understanding and enactment of this hierarchy in intimate

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<sup>2</sup> The number in brackets following a participant’s identification number indicates their age at the time of the interview.

lives. How does intercourse accrue its status as “the most you can do” with someone? Why is intercourse positioned as more intimate than other forms of sex despite assertions that other sexual activities are often more pleasurable (e.g., Nicolson & Burr, 2003)?

When asked why participants defined sex in these (phallogentric) ways, women pointed to media (P03 (25, Straight\*); P19 (18, Straight)), previous sex education (P13 (24, Straight); P16 (18, Straight)), and ideas shared by peers (P19) and parents (P13). Many participants explained that they had either never thought about what they conceptualize as sex before the interview context or that their definition has evolved with age, experience, or subsequent to sexual encounters with women. For example, Participant 01 (26, Queer) highlights the difficulties inherent in negotiating a definition that sits outside of the norm and she describes renegotiating her conceptualization following sex with women:

I’ve kept a log of all the people I’ve slept with so then it gets really interesting cause when I started sleeping with women I was like oh wait a second so(hh)mething didn’t happen here that I’m used to happening calling sex so I had to kind of change my own definition of it cause like I obviously slept with these people but we like only did oral or did like ha-manual stimulation so but then my definition had to change for men too right cause like if I include only oral as sex with women then I have to include only oral as sex with men. Like what the fuck is that, I dunno. ((laughing)) I dunno how- so definitely like the full Monty is if there is penetration involved I’m like yeah that’s definitely sex. But like because of that situa- like oh I have to redefine things I actually don’t, I don’t know if I would be able to give a solid number of the people I’ve slept with cause I don’t know how to define that at this point and I don’t know if I could remember situations from



when I was sixteen what happened and if I would reframe that. (Participant 01 (26, Queer))

Here she reflects that she “obviously” slept with people despite not having intercourse with them and yet she acknowledges the difficulty in deviating from taken for granted notions of what counts as sex. It is often reflected that even after careful consideration, it can be difficult to reconcile experiences that do not fit with the dominant (heterosexual) account of sex or even to describe why intercourse is the only sexual act positioned as ‘actual’ sex. Participant 16 (18, Straight) says: “I guess it’s just the way it’s been classified- or like at least the way it’s been taught when I’ve been taking sex ed in elementary school that’s what it was referred to as like intercourse was referred to as sex and oral sex and masturbation and all that was just kind of in its own zone”. She locates the rules of sex as something that are taught rather than negotiated internally. This stifling factual equation of sex as intercourse limits individual understandings and meaning making practices based on lived experiences.

Participant 19 (18, Straight) similarly talks about the influence of media when thinking about why the typical progression of heterosex culminates in intercourse. She says: “Obviously like there’s parts of the media and like um that sort of make you feel like that’s the norm like having sex with someone is normal so like you should be doing it as well”. In line with other participants, imperative language (“should”) is used to express a perceived sense of obligation and individual responsibility to engage in sex (Gavey, Braun, & McPhillips, 1999). Education about sex is framed as both prescriptive and restrictive (“I was taught that...like, here’s what sex is. You know? And it was a very narrow definition. Whether it was my parents or sex ed, it wasn’t talking about this whole area of things that it could mean. It was just teaching like “This is how this happens, you know?” This is how people make children. This is sex”, P13 (24,

Straight)) and these teachings come to be taken up by individuals in their own constructions of what counts as sex.

In some cases, sex is defined in terms of associated risks. That is, intercourse is most often the only activity defined as sex as “there are more risks to having sex for example, pregnancy and um STIs and such” (P19 (18, Striaight)). Risks are listed as pregnancy (P17; P19), STIs (P19) and rape (P19). In many ways these findings are not at all new, but rather echo discourses that have been circulating for decades about abstaining from sex as risk avoidance. This positioning of intercourse as the ultimate sexual experience is incongruent with participants’ assertions that other sexual activites are often more pleasurable.

Participant 15 (18, Bisexual) differentiates between “having sex” and “making love” in defining that counts as sex. Sex, according to Participant 15, relates to physical sexual acts that take place in contexts where there is no time for positions that facilitate a connection: “A quickie, like, five minutes doggy-style in the forest- that to me is just sex. Cause it- all it did was happen”. For her, the primary difference between having sex and making love is the emotional connection between two people—when this connection is present while doing anything sexual, including making out, she would then consider the act to be making love. In contrast to her definition of sex she says: “Being in bed um on top of each other, having time to explore each other’s body, you’re experiencing it rather than it just happening.” Sex is positioned as something that “just happens”, something that is rather mechanical. In line with this distinction, she presents two versions of the progression of sex for her, noting that it varies depending on her sexual partner. In one collection of stories, she describes her high school boyfriend, a previous friend with benefits, and various people she has met on Tinder (which she summarizes as “the guys that I’ve been with before”). In these accounts, sex (and ultimately penetration) are

positioned as inevitable and mutually understood. She describes the heterosexual progression of sex as: “makeout, um...touching of, like, the boobs and genitalia and then putting it in”. Missing in this script is communication or a collective decision making process, where a conversation about what is desired takes place. She notes that conversation is central to sex with her girlfriend (“having a conversation til like 2 a.m. and then somebody initiating it”) whereas sex with someone from Tinder has “*barely* any conversation. You just do it. And then the person leaves”. Notably, she highlights the gendered differences in her sexual experiences as she clarifies that her Tinder experiences have typically been with men.

Participant 03 (25, Straight\*<sup>3</sup>) differentiates between the typical progression of sex and her ideal progression of sex. Implicit in her distinction is that what typically happens is not what she would prefer. In talking about what typically happens during sex, she stresses that sexual activities leading up to intercourse are often absent (while noting that foreplay is central to her ideal progression) and that she feels pressured to engage in intercourse. She says: “Um what usually happens is I’ll sorta feel pressured to have sex first like before- or intercourse I mean, sorry intercourse without a build up”. Participant 03 notes that when she feels this pressure to engage in intercourse, which she describes as omnipresent rather than imposed by her partner (“I can’t even say it’s like coercive or like uh physically like holding me down. Definitely not like that but it’s more like this expectation that I feel obligated to fulfill in a weird way”), that this will resolve either by her refusing sex and suggesting a massage instead, or by acquiescing to follow the traditional script of heterosex:

I: Um in the instances like where you have intercourse is there anything leading up to it?

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<sup>3</sup> Two participants (02 & 03) noted that they identified as straight based on their relationship history but disclaimed that they would be open to same-sex relationship. This will be marked with an asterisk (e.g., Straight\*) throughout the analysis.

Or like what happens.

P03: Um like not really that's what like kind of upsets me. It's like I can tell he's aroused and I'm not there but sometimes I don't- I wanna sort of- or almost like do it to end it if that makes sense. Like to just kind of get it out of the way so we- I can move onto something else like reading or something e(hh)lse which sounds kind of silly right but um so then like I'll- like I guess I'll notice right and he'll be sort of- I guess starts to touch me? And and like ((sighs)) I guess like...it's not even that he says let's have se-intercourse right now or like forces himself onto me? But I just want it to end kind of. So then I'll like, we'll like- I'll have to get like lubrication cause I'm not like there? And then he'll- we'll just have sex.

I: Ok

P03: Intercourse

I: Right intercourse. And when does that end. Like when does sex end.

P03: Um when he's done. When he has an orgasm [ok] not when I'm done.

Interestingly, participants never based their assumption of sex as intercourse on personal experience, but more often related to individual and societal pressures or messages about what 'should' happen. As Participant 03's account highlights, her preferred progression and practiced progression differ. The latter lacks foreplay, which she paints as necessary for her enjoyment, and often begins without her desire. She disclaims against the conclusion that sex is "forced" and positions her engagement as an active choice in order to "end it". Here, as she emphasized, the end of sex is synonymous with male orgasm and not her orgasm.

**Sex ends when he comes.** In contrast to Randall and Byers' (2003) study which found that orgasm was central to what participants counted as 'sex', orgasm was not discussed in the

context of what counts. Rather, definitions of sex were more often based on associated risks and previous learning (as highlighted above). When asked about whether or not orgasm was central to sex (and further yet good sex) the majority of participants indicated that it enhanced sex but was not essential, and that good sex was absolutely possible without orgasm. Rather, connection and respect were positioned as most central to good sex<sup>4</sup>. Yet, despite assertions that orgasm was neither central to definitions of what counts as sex nor to good sex, male orgasm was frequently cited as the primary means of ending sex.

It has long been documented that the primary way in which (hetero)sex ends is with a male partner's orgasm (Braun et al., 2003; Potts, 2002). According to the orgasmic imperative (Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Potts, 2002), orgasm is positioned as necessary to sexual fulfillment and denotes the end of sex. However, although some women in this study noted that orgasm certainly enhances or improves a sexual experience, the majority of women explained that orgasm was not central and that good sex was still possible without orgasm (e.g., "it doesn't always have to end in orgasm to be like a successful sexual experience", P07 (26, Straight)). Participant 09 (26, Straight) defines the goal of sex in relation to pleasure, which she does not conflate with orgasm. She describes "the goal" as "something that feels good" and emphasizes that everyone has different preferences and ideas about what feels good for them. Further, Participant 10 (20, Bisexual) troubles the heteronormative notion of a sex 'goal' and notes that this hegemonic script limits possibilities for pleasure. She discloses that she has only ever achieved orgasm while masturbating but does not share this with others because it is "a shameful thing". At the same time, she notes that she has had "really great sex and sexual experiences where [she] hasn't orgasmed" and disclaims that she does not think that orgasm is a "realistic

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<sup>4</sup> This will be discussed in detail beginning on page 43.

goal” for women since “it’s a lot harder for women to come”. Participant 11 (19, Bisexual) explains that this narrow goal-oriented view of sex is “dismissing the point of why you’re having sex” as “there’s so much mo(hh)re than just that” (meaning orgasm). And yet, as other researchers have highlighted (e.g., Potts, 2000) orgasm is positioned as central to pleasure and the primary way in which sex ends is with (male) orgasm. Indeed, when asked about how sex ends, many participants asserted that in the vast majority of cases (with men) sex ends in male orgasm:

Sex usually ends when he comes. When he comes I’m usually like “cool, I guess that’s the end of it”. (Participant 04 (23, Queer))

Well I think a lot of times like a lot of partners I’ve had it end because they’re done like if it’s like with male partners I find it’s like they reach climax and then they’re like “ah that was great” (*laughter*) and you’re like “okay I guess we’re done now” (Participant 10 (20, Bisexual))

When he comes. Unless he cares about you? And then he’ll try harder if you don’t come first or whatever. (Participant 15 (18, Bisexual))

Not only does male orgasm end sex, it precludes all possibilities for continued female pleasure or orgasm. Participants 04 and 10 use the expression “I guess”, which could imply uncertainty however in this context reads as sarcasm that casts disdain on the absence of attention to female pleasure. This is unless “he cares about you” (P15), in which case more effort may be afforded to facilitate female orgasm.

Differing from the accounts above where sex ends in male orgasm, Participant 19 (18, Straight) describes sex as ending when both partners have received pleasure. She then follows up to explain that this is synonymous with orgasm-- at least for her male partner. For herself,

pleasure (and thus the end of sex) can occur when she has an orgasm, however in some cases she says “people might even you know they fake it just to get it over with or they feel bad um that the other person couldn’t please them I guess”. This positioning echoes discourses of women as responsible for pleasing male partners and also showing their own pleasure (whether or not it is actually experienced) in order to protect their partner’s ego. She explains: “I feel like...making someone feel good like you feel good about yourself because you were able to do it”. Similarly, Participant 20 (22, Straight) describes having sex as a necessary task within the role of the girlfriend. Despite her earlier assertion that she typically does not enjoy sexual intercourse, she highlights how leading her partner to orgasm (through intercourse) is important (“when he finishes, it’s like, ok I’ve done my job as a girlfriend. Ok, like good job for me”). A typical sexual encounter with her boyfriend, she describes, will start with, making out, taking off clothes and then leads to “hardcore touching”. She says: “Well usually he would like touch me down there to get me like wet. Right and then yeah, he just like puts it in (hh). And then he goes for whatever rounds and then he’d come. And then, and then...that’s it”. Missing in this account is her own desire. What is obscured from these accounts (and many others) are unequal gender and power relations that maintain the conditions creating a repackaged modern iteration of Hollway’s (1989) male sex drive and have/hold discourses. Here, possibilities for pleasure are stifled by the expectation that it is important to please her partner.

**(Re)counting differently: An alternative view of what counts.** Some women described narratives counter to the ‘sex as intercourse’ discourse. Notably, many of these alternative accounts were offered by the same women who also described sex in coital imperative terms. In many accounts, sexual acts other than intercourse were considered to ‘count’ as sex. This occurred primarily in the context of same-sex relationships, although some participants did also

describe alternatives to intercourse in the context of heterosex. It appears as if sex with women is liberated (at least in part) from the restrictive script of heterosex and allows for a more capacious exploration, spontaneity and greater pursuit of physical pleasure. Participants who had engaged in sexual activity with women spoke differently of the end of sex in these contexts. Participants noted that the progression of sex and subsequently the end of sex with a female partner is “a lot less defined” (P04 (23, Queer)) and “less consistent” (P10 (20, Bisexual)).

As an alternative way of describing sex, a few participants describe what counts as sex using language of consent and desire. As P03 (25, Straight\*), P05 (35, Bisexual) and P06 (18, Pansexual) articulate, consent is necessary in order for any sexual acts to ‘count’ as sex. Participant 06 (18, Pansexual) says: “Cause if someone was touching and you don’t want it, then that’s kinda like rape-ey like rape, pretty much. Um , so yeah, not like- it has to be consensual if it’s like, if it’s considered sex”. She also references desire when explaining what it means to be sexually active (“you want to have sex with someone”; “it could be a desire to do [sexual acts]”). Participant 03 (25, Straight\*) also employs discourses of consent and desire in her broad definition of what counts as sex. She defines sex as: “any romantic interactions? Where you feel a desire I guess sexual nature in the sense that you have a need to fulfill, some kind of sexual need.” When asked about what particular activities ‘count’, she references consent as she says “maybe kissing, um any I guess sort of touching, all consensual, um like traditional vaginal sex of like anal sex or any sort of like touching I guess hands or mouth”. Notably, while she describes sex in terms of consent and desire on a conceptual level, this view contradicts the account she provides above of her practiced progressions where she describes her frequent absence of desire during sex. Thus, it would appear as if her conceptual definition of sex and her practiced version differ, highlighting the complexities of navigating the pressures of heterosex.



Participant 23 (18, Straight) describes sex in terms of “mutual pleasure”. That is, both partners are satisfied sexually (e.g., one-sided oral does not count here but mutual oral sex would). Similarly, Participant 16 (18, Straight) describes sex in relation to pleasure. However, where she initially defines sex in terms of mutual pleasure, she renegotiates her account as she reflects that sometimes people are “using” the other person exclusively for their own pleasure or that the purpose of sex can be solely to please a partner (“it’s something that people do for pleasure whether they do it for you or themselves”). Here, pleasure is positioned not only in relation to one’s own desires, but in relation to expectations about pleasing one’s partner through sexual satisfaction. This begs the question: is this one-sided version of pleasure for the purpose of pleasing really satisfying embodied desires or is this an enactment of heterosexual mandates disguised as pleasure under the guise of postfeminist choice?

When asked about other possibilities for having sex, many women had difficulty articulating how they might desire sex differently, often stating that they had never thought about it. Despite accounts that intercourse is not necessarily the most sexually fulfilling activity and that other sexual acts were more pleasurable, many women asserted that they were satisfied with their current progression of sex. Other women had thought about how they might want sex differently, but highlight the challenges in sharing these sex acts that are considered ‘taboo’ to partners and similarly friends for fear of judgment. For example, Participant 03 (25, Straight\*) relegates anal sex as a “gay men sexual activity” which therefore limits her ability to share this desire with others. Participant 14 (30, Straight) expresses a discomfort with disrupting what she terms the dominant “A plus B equals C” script. She says: “I didn’t...feel comfortable bringing up different activities? Because...I felt either that he...would feel uncomfortable with doing them...in general? Or he would assume that I had done them with somebody else and would

think badly of me”. Implicit in her account is the notion that deviating from the dominant sex script would lead to discomfort, as it threatens hegemonic masculinity or ‘the way things are’ and instead she would be met with disapproval for her ‘deviant’ behaviour.

The diversity in participants’ articulations of what counts as sex and the ways in which they differ from dominant conceptions of sex as intercourse is important to consider. While many participants either initially described sex in heteronormative terms that equate sex with intercourse or noted that this conception was internalized in their younger years, many participants also unpacked this assumption in the interview and noted how this had changed over time with experience. As Fahs and McClelland (2016) highlight, “we as researchers must ask questions about what concepts mean, what assumptions underlie those concepts, and how those definitions may obscure or drive underground certain nuances, contingencies, identities, or realities that constitute significant losses to the study of sexuality” (p. 16) in order to strive for enhanced intimate lives that are reflective of embodied, rather than socially prescribed, desires.

### **Good Sex**

Good sex was often broken down in terms of physical and emotional components. Indeed, when asked about what makes for good sex, the majority of participants depicted their descriptions into two central categories: what makes sex physically pleasurable and what is necessary to nurture emotional/mental needs. Interestingly, most participants focused more heavily on describing the necessary emotional conditions, which were frequently cited as communication, comfort and consent.

#### **Performing and enjoying: Negotiating physical pleasure and emotional connection.**

All participants spoke of good sex as requiring both physical pleasure *and* an emotional connection, often privileging the emotional aspect. This was often enmeshed in discourses of

physical performance and negotiated through a realization that ‘emotional’ sex is preferred:

I actually had to like train myself out of the party girl sex stuff and then find this other version of it which I prefer by a long shot. Um but again cultural norms are rooted in me, what I’ve grown up with learning so the performative sex that happens when you’ve had a couple drinks and you’re out with someone that you like um. (Participant 01 (26, Queer))

Participant 01 (26, Queer) reflects on how she has come to realize over time that she prefers sex that is more about enjoying yourself and “slowing down” to explore. “This version of it” references sex that occurs within the context of a relationship. She then notes that she is now “having better sex as a whole” and reflects that this is a result of “recognizing that there’s a difference between performing and enjoying” and that she chooses which one to “tap into” depending on the context. She describes that she taps into either her performative self or her enjoying self, depending on what is “appropriate and necessary” in the moment. The use of the word “necessary” implies that there are situations where performance is a requirement. Further, the word “appropriate” suggests a set of rules that would dictate in which context which sexual self is the most appropriate. Although she does not clarify here what these situations are, she earlier describes performative sex in the context of casual hookups whereas “slowing down” and enjoying each other in a relationship leads to better sex most of the time. Casual sex is depicted as “fun” although not “particularly amazing”.

When asked about what feels good about sex, Participant 04 (23, Queer) says: “50/50 the physical and mental. Um a lot of it is mental. Um I think that’s pretty common for women actually”. Her gendered account of how women in general find the mental connection important is reflective of dominant ideas about women are requiring connection and approval. Indeed,

participants often tied the mental experience to pleasing their partner and to knowing that their partner is attracted to them. Participants 07, 11, and others all assert that feeling desired is a significant part of what makes for good sex:

I enjoy someone like wanting me and like being attracted to me emotionally like the connection between us just cause like it feels like our relationship's strong and I know he loves me and I'm making him happy kind of thing. (Participant 07 (26, Straight))

Just having somebody, like want to have their hands all over you is a good feeling.  
(Participant 11 (19, Bisexual))

The provision of male desire, according to Participant 07 (26, Straight), is a symbol of relationship strength and that her performance is sufficiently adequate to maintain his satisfaction. Here, desire is framed not in terms of a corporeal desire, but rather a desire to be a successful seductress. Her construction as an "object of permanent surveillance" (Gurevich et al., 2015, p. 526) and thereby a sexually proficient partner overrides her own physical pleasure as she goes on to say: "physically like if it's not feeling good I-I mean I'd be happy to still- that he's getting off but it still needs a fe- it still- I don't know it always does feel good at least so- to some extent". Although the first ingredient that she listed for good sex was being wanted, she appears to wrestle with this as she considers that being desired and desiring do not always co-exist. Participant 07 trails off and hesitates on several occasions in this account, implying that her partner's desire and her desire to please her partner still override her internal desire and yet this account represents what it means to have good sex. It appears then as if it is impossible in the relationship context for the concept of unwanted sex to exist, where desire for pleasure can be trumped by desire to please. Holland and colleagues (1988) have contended that there is a lack of positive discourses about female desire and assert that female desire is most often

appropriated by male needs, reflecting an internalization of what is necessary to serve male desire. These accounts are in contrast to Farvid's (2013) work on casual sex in which women describe having sex purely for physical pleasure. Notably, the majority of participants in this study verbalized that they would not feel comfortable having a one-night stand nor sex with someone they were not in a relationship with. While a few participants did describe having casual sex (e.g., "party girl sex", Participant 01 (26, Queer)), they nonetheless asserted that this was more about performance than enjoyment and that they prefer sex within the context of a long-term relationship. It is unclear from these accounts whether this preference for relationship sex is a reaction to ideas about what it means for women to be sexually promiscuous (i.e., that she is labelled a slut) or whether in many cases a relationship offers more familiar terrain in which to develop sexual communication habits that foster a sense of comfort and consideration for each other.

**Communication, comfort and consent.** Most participants first described good sex in the context of communication with their partner. Indeed, good sex is constructed as something that is created through consideration as a condition necessary to feel sufficiently safe and comfortable (e.g., "being comfortable in the space", P08 (Straight, 20)). Communication is listed as something that allows for this to happen (and yet verbal communication is not often part of sexual initiation). When asked about what makes for good sex, participants said:

Mm I guess consideration? Like of each other. So knowing like what someone else wants or likes so that's why I feel like sometimes it's not good cause he doesn't consider what I want or like? (Participant 03 (25, Straight\*))

I think it's when- when both partners are able to walk away from- from whatever they were doing and feel really good about it like- like they both d-d they definitely consent to

it they were- they were ready for it, they performed really well I guess(hh) and they- they just really overall liked what happened what went on between them. (Participant 16 (18, Straight))

Internal desire, knowing what the other person desires, and then collectively agreeing to engage in sex facilitates positive sexual experiences. Notably, specific physical acts are absent from these descriptions of good sex and rather internalized desire takes center stage. Participant 08 (20, Straight) reiterates that comfort is a necessary condition for good sex and that this is created through communication. She highlights the distinction between having sex with a partner and a stranger as she says, “Like with \*partner\* I will say whatever I want but with like other guys like I don’t know [...]”. This trailing off alludes to uncertainty and difficulty in voicing desire with “other guys”. She also notes that when she was younger and had not thought much about her own desire (“I didn’t really know a lot about sex so I didn’t know what I wanted I didn’t know what would feel better um and also when I was younger it was more like what the guy wanted I guess? Which like stinks but whatever it worked out fine (laughter)” but that this has evolved with age. She highlights the consequences of not being comfortable as she talks about having sex with someone other than her partner and says “I had sex with someone else and it was terrible because I wasn’t comfortable enough like I didn’t get wet or anything”. The conditions necessary for comfort are often described in terms of emotional, mental, physical, and sometimes spiritual components:

Well you want to feel like you’re connecting with the person. I don’t, like, I, I don’t want, it just feels like you’re satisfying a physical need. I want there to be a mental and emotional connection. And, as cheesy as it sounds sometimes a spiritual connection as well, um, on rare occasions. (Participant 04 (23, Queer))

In this excerpt, Participant 04 describes all of the necessary ingredients for a good sexual experience. These accounts of connection and closeness are often woven together with talk of physical positions which she describes as a taken-for-granted part of the equation (“the genitals part, that part’s a no brainer, of course that’s happening”, P04). Participant 04 follows up by describing that in terms of physical requirements, she prefers physical positions where “most of your body is touching most of their body” as this further facilitates a sense of closeness and connection. Part of this was related to “showing your body like your insecurities” (P06 (18, Pansexual)) and “being vulnerable” (P01 (26, Queer)). Participant 10 (20, Bisexual) invokes a rhetoric of consent (“checking in a lot”) in describing good sex. She addresses the awkwardness that others have described in using the language of consent and acknowledges that there are alternative and more subtle ways of “checking in”. She says: “it doesn’t have to be like “is this like- is this okay” or just being like “does that feel good would or like you rather if I did it like this”. She refers to these check-in moments as “gentle additions of consent throughout rather than just being like “is this hurting you””. The distinction she makes here is between checking for displeasure and sometimes pain, and shifting toward a discourse of desire where attention is paid to asking what would lead to a pleasureable experience. Here, both partners are responsible for checking in and the onus is not on an individual to voice discomfort. Like many others, she again references comfort as a necessary condition in order to be able to voice pleasure (“[I’m] really enjoying myself”) and desire (“this connection, this is great”).

While it might seem intuitive that comfort would be a necessary condition to engage in sex, this is often absent from dominant discourses about what it means to have good sex. Popularized media most often prioritize discourses around performance rather than embodied pleasure (Frith, 2015b; Gill, 2009). Do consent and corporeality have to be mutually exclusive?

As the excerpts highlight, while there are many similarities in participants' accounts (i.e., that both emotional and physical components of sex are necessary for good sex), there are also many individualized versions of what in particular makes for good sex. What might be more useful than encouraging a rewriting of the script of what makes for good sex (that is, shifting our vision of what constitutes good sex from the *Cosmo* version prioritizing certain physical acts to another category approach of prioritizing emotional components) is to envision a place where *asking* rather than *assuming* what partners enjoy becomes a standard practice.

### **'Bad' Sex: From Unpleasurable Sex to Unwanted and Painful Sex**

When asked about 'bad' sex, participants spoke of a wide range of experiences, from unpleasurable sex to sex that was unwanted and/or coerced. That is, bad sex was used to describe both sex that was unskilled and therefore unpleasurable as well as sex that was unwanted, painful, and/or coerced, and left participants visibly upset (see also Thomas et al., 2016).

Several participants outlined the difference between these two types of bad sex and positioned them on a scale, ranging from disappointing but with little consequence to bad sex that has significant emotional consequences. For example, Participant 04 (23, Queer) explains that two experiences come to mind when asked about 'bad' sex and disclaims that they are in very different categories: one she refers to as "bad as in just, you know, uh this wasn't good sex" and the other as "abuse stuff". In the first example, she describes an encounter that was physically painful but that she was mentally enjoying. She says: "I didn't tell him to stop or anything because I was enjoying myself mentally but my genitals were in pain, I didn't like that. I liked him so I wanted it to continue going because I liked him as a person and I wanted to develop a relationship with him, um, even though I wasn't having fun in that moment." Implicit



in this account is the expectation that sex is a relationship requirement. Her reference to ‘mental’ enjoyment signals a discrepancy between physical pleasure and what sex is offering in this context, which is the possibility for a relationship. What are the consequences, if any, of sacrificing physical pleasure to promote building a relationship? The other experience she describes, the “abuse stuff”, is talked about in the context of describing ‘bad’ sex, but she acknowledges that this would be considered rape<sup>5</sup>.

Relatedly, Participant 07 (26, Straight) discriminates between two instances of ‘bad’ sex: one time with her husband where “he came in like two seconds” and then another time that she was having sex with an acquaintance where she was not enjoying sex and felt disrespected. She makes a point of differentiating between the two experiences, highlighting that they have very different emotional consequences. The latter is referred to as “really bad sex” where “it affects [her] afterwards if [she] walks away from it feeling bad about [her]self” whereas the time with her husband is described as a “very minor bad sex incident”. This “very minor” label reads as something that is insignificant and without consequence. When bad sex is used to describe negative experiences that range from unpleasurable to unwanted and coerced experiences, these ‘bad’ and unwanted experiences are at risk of being passed off as simply “bad” (Thomas et al., 2016) or “just sex” (Gavey, 2005) (i.e., normative sex and therefore not problematic).

**‘It’s just easier to get him to come than to get him out’.** Not only is agreeing to unwanted or bad sex often positioned as a choice, but it is also framed as the logical choice because it is ‘easier’ than the alternatives-- whether that is trying to have the person leave (P01 (26, Queer)), having a negative conversation (P03 (25, Straight\*)), the partner getting mad (P04

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<sup>5</sup> Later in her account she describes that she prefers to term her experience “abuse” rather than “rape” as the latter is imbued with connotations of victimhood.

(23, Queer) or being ‘gossiped about’ (P03).

Participant 07 (26, Straight) frames sex as something that comes easily to her and thereby minimizes the negative impact that engaging in unwanted sex may have on her emotional well-being. She says:

Um there was this one time with this one guy and he was just-just makes me cringe thinking about it but it was just like he was just like... fucking my mouth for lack of a better word and it was just like so awful but I just let him do it and I just felt like absolute shit afterwards cause like I a) didn’t know him that well and b) like I wasn’t enjoying it and I just felt not respected so I just felt like really bad about myself after that and I never talked to him again or anything and so that was a bad experience and then [...] I could have-I could have stopped it if I wanted to I did have the power to do that and I’m very confident like with guys and stuff but in that moment for some reason I just allowed it to happen um... (Participant 07 (26, Straight))

Notably, she invokes permissive language and positions herself as in control by asserting that she “let him” or “allowed” him to do it and that she “could have stopped it if [she] wanted to”. When reflecting on why she “let” it happen, she does not have a clear reason. Societal coercion (i.e., implicit pressures to engage in sex when requested) remains invisible here and postfeminist notions of free choice make it her responsibility to end the ‘bad’ experience.

Echoing Participant 07’s ‘let it happen’ discourse, Participant 01 (26, Queer) invokes a ‘risk avoidance’ discourse as she positions engaging in unwanted sex as less risky than physically trying to have him leave:

P01: At that point I was like you know it’s probably easier just to placate him than it is to get him out. So we had like really like- I did not wanna have sex with this person but in

my head I was like you know what I'm not like- sex is easy for me. Like it's less risk than trying to get rid of this person right. It's just easier like to get him to come than get him out.

I: So there might be more risk [yeah] in saying get out or=

P01: Yeah no. And like I recognize that that's problematic but that's definitely like that's a, that's a me choice and I'm very of that wouldn't work for a lot of people.

This woman relies on discourses of postfeminist choice as she paints her decision to engage in unwanted sex as an active choice. Participant 01 (26, Queer) highlights that she is aware that there is something “problematic” about engaging in, rather than refusing, unwanted sex, and yet acquiescing is an “easier” and possibly safer option than a direct refusal. Participant 03 (25, Straight) talks about how intimately connected sex and violence are (“like violence and sex is so connected and just um yeah there's like messages like what would happen if you don't comply with sex”) and explicitly points to sexual compliance as a means of controlling a potentially violent situation:

It's almost like if you can appease that person to control the situation and in a weird way knowing that your body's like a commodity or something or like a way to- a means to an end in some way. (Participant 03 (25, Straight\*))

In this account, the body is referred to as a “commodity”, as something that can be used to achieve a desired goal, which in this case is the end of sex. This positioning of the body echoes discourses of sex as social capital where female sexuality is seen as an object of value within a heterosexual marketplace (Fahs, 2011b). Accounts of women being bought and exchanged as gifts pepper Western history (Fahs, 2011b), and in this participant's account, co-opting this historical construction of female sexuality becomes a means of “control[ling] the

situation”. Participant 03 then follows up and asserts that with her current partner “it would definitely not be that way”, meaning that she could directly refuse sex and her partner would stop. Yet she asserts that in her current relationship there are other types of consequences related to refusing sex, for example disappointing her partner or having a negative conversation, and she would rather have sex than deal with another type of consequence:

Like that if I could avoid I will if it's- and I guess I contemplate in my mind it's not so bad right now or like maybe I'm being unfair- there's this sort of mental gymnastics that happens that back and forth so like I guess to r(hh)ationalize what you're doing? [...] but then I think the reason I try to rush it is so I don't have these cognitive dissonance like I'm doing something I don't wanna d(hh) you know like so I don't feel like I'm being untrue to what I want right now? (Participant 03 (25, Straight\*))

This account highlights the complexities of negotiating one's own desires while also taking stock of potential consequences of sexual refusal. Participant 03 refers to this internal negotiation as “mental gymnastics” in order to “rationalize” the decision to have unwanted sex. There are inevitable consequences to both actions. On the one hand, refusing unwanted sex could lead to consequences such as upsetting a partner, having a negative conversation, and in some cases possible violence. On the other hand, however, engaging in unwanted sex feels like “being untrue” to her own desires which reads as distressing given that she “tr[ies] to rush it” to end the cognitive dissonance she experiences. This mental gymnastics between only two options (acquiescing or facing a consequence) obscures other possible options for addressing unwanted sexual advancements.

Participants also invoked a biological essentialist perspective (Beres & Farvid, 2010) when talking about their decision to engage in sex that was unwanted, unenjoyable, or painful.

This was reminiscent the *male sex drive discourse* (Hollway, 1989) in which men are positioned as inherently *needing* sex whereas women are passive commodities who give their bodies to men for sex. Several participants voiced concern that their partners would experience “blue balls” if they did not give in to having sex with them. For example, Participant 20 (22, Straight) recounts an experience of painful sex and cites male orgasm as the only possible way in which sex could end. She says: “Like I guess he tried to move me [reposition her body to make sex less painful], but in the end it didn’t work and like he goes until he comes. Right? But I couldn’t...like, you know?”. In justifying why this is when sex ends, she notes that “he gets blue balls or some shit”. Her account is peppered with rising inflections and the repetition of the phrase “you know?”, seeking to verify that the interviewer understands what she is describing and to affirm that this is in fact a common experience. She then goes on to question whether her partner’s narrative is accurate and asks the interviewer whether or not “holding it in there” (i.e., not ejaculating) could actually hurt her partner. Similarly, Participant 17 (18, Straight) says:

I mean I don’t like regret that we had it even though it wasn’t that enjoyable for me it was still better than not having sex [...] I don’t wanna leave him like that and I don’t want him to get blue balls or anything so yeah just did it and it was still good but like it’s still better than not having sex but it wasn’t like good sex. (Participant 17 (18, Straight))

Participant 17 (18, Straight) appears conflicted between disclaiming that having sex, although unenjoyable, was better than not having sex and that she does not regret it, while at the same time negotiating how this experience could be categorized (e.g., “it was still good”, “it wasn’t like good sex”). The conflicting accounts of whether sex was “still good”, or “wasn’t like good” points to a negotiation of whether her partner’s perceived biological needs override her unenjoyment. Participant 04 (23, Queer) bolsters a similar negotiation when she disclaims

against the interpretation that sex could be regrettable. When talking about an experience of sex with a new partner that she describes as “not fun”, “not good” and painful, she says: “I don’t regret it, it was a learning experience, but it was bad”. Here again, engaging in “bad” sex is almost framed as a right of passage, as something that can be prevented with adequate experience and learning, and an experience that allows for ‘sexual learning’ about what types of sexual experiences to avoid in the future (see also Bryant & Schofield, 2007).

**Faking to facilitate finishing.** In line with Thomas and colleagues (2016), and others (Cacchioni, 2007; Fahs, 2011a; Frith 2013), some women spoke of feigning sexual pleasure or faking orgasm as a means to guiding sex toward its necessary end without risking disrupting dominant heterosexual sex scripts or facing other consequences, as described above. Women talked about faking orgasm as an alternative to being “rude” (P19 (18, Straight)) or inciting a “negative conversation” (P04 (23, Queer)) and described this practice as “easier and less awkward to just pretend almost it’s a more natural ending” (P04). By faking orgasm, you could “just end it” (P03 (25, Straight\*); P19 (28, Straight)):

It was a couple years ago, it’s fine. Um, it’s not fine, he’s a dick, uh, but... yeah so I, I was forced into continuing to have sex with him, long after I stopped wanting to, I was faking orgasms because I didn’t want him to get mad at me for um not uh, enjoying myself. Um, because you know, for the rest of our relationship we had been having great sex life, so you know, I was coming at the touch of a button so it was never an issue. But then I was no longer attracted to him because he was being such an asshole and uh, I felt forced into doing this and I felt deeply uncomfortable with my body, I felt uncomfortable with his body, I didn’t want him to touch me, but I let him because I felt that I owed him and, I uh, I just sort of felt like this is my life now. Um, and, ((sigh)) and uh I don’t know.

(Participant 04 (23, Queer))

In this excerpt, Participant 04 describes an abusive relationship in which she was frequently subjected to unwanted sex and was expected to enjoy it. Faking orgasm became a way of appearing to enjoy herself sexually in order to appease her partner and thereby evade his anger. This does not come without a cost, however, as she describes the emotional consequences and deep discomfort that she felt while enduring forced sex.

In response to being asked about what she does when she is not enjoying sex in the moment, Participant 03 (25, Straight\*) says:

Yeah I'll usually um try to make it like k- like as quick as possible? So somehow trying to make him like hurry it up without saying hurry up? Like let's just end it? So it might be like I'll like encouraging him to have an orgasm in like a more sexual way so that it doesn't seem like I'm wanting to rush it but more like I want it to happen? [...] And it's so- it's like a sensitive topic cause then it's like if you were to just abruptly be like "get off of me!" or like "stop" or like "I don't wanna do this anymore" that like probes more of a negative conversation? It like- the atmosphere would be- like I wanna avoid the negative consequence of abruptly ending or being like no you need to stop cause I'm not enjoying myself? So I'll just quicken it up just like make it happen quicker." (Participant 03)

Both Participant 03 (25, Straight\*) and 04 (23, Queer) talk about the practice of faking orgasm as a means of guiding sex in contexts where they were "not enjoying" sex or were deeply "uncomfortable". This act brings sex to an end more quickly, without consequences of having a negative conversation or inciting anger in one's partner. This appears to be the only option as ending sex abruptly is a "sensitive topic" (P03) or sex is positioned as something that is "owed"

(P04).

Participant 07 (26, Straight) differentiates between how she would refuse sex presently (by telling her partner she was not enjoying sex) and in the past where she would either not say anything or fake orgasm to end sex (“I just felt like the moment needed an orgasm for his sake”). In explaining her decision to fake orgasm for her partner’s “sake”, she disclaims against the interviewer’s interpretation that this was the only option and asserts that “I could have potentially stopped it as well it just depends on the overall context of that was happening.”. While this disclaimer was intended to invoke agency, the term “potentially” derives an uncertainty and notion that this would have only been possible in certain contexts. She then says: “Cause I’ve definitely just like walked out on people as well if I- or just removed myself from the situation if I wasn’t enjoying it but that was probably more of a rare case like uh be more likely to let it run its course.” Letting the encounter “run its course” is akin to the approach taken with the common cold, where the only viable solution is to wait until it comes to a natural end, with remedies to speed along the encounter (metaphorically similar to faking here). In considering the difficulties that women have highlighted in refusing unwanted sex (including the possibility that a direct refusal would not warrant stopping), faking orgasm is an ingenuous solution to ending unwanted sex in a way that aligns with heteronormative sex scripts (Gavey, 2005; Thomas et al., 2016).

**‘Internalized social pressure’: Oral sex as an alternative to refusing unwanted sex.**

Participant 03 (25, Straight\*) describes bad sex as “feeling like you have to have oral sex or intercourse”. In some instances, oral sex becomes an alternative that is negotiated as a compromise where participants did not want to engage in ‘actual’ sex (i.e., intercourse) but felt that direct refusal would be difficult. Participant 20 (22, Straight) talks about not wanting to



engage in intercourse due to religious beliefs but describes oral sex as a viable alternative as it is something “forgivable”. However, she nods to the coital imperative (Gavey, Braun, & McPhillips, 1999) noting that oral sex is only something that “you can do for so long” before intercourse becomes inevitable. Here, sexual intercourse is framed in terms of a gift giving discourse (Fahs, 2011b; Gilfoyle, Wilson, & Brown, 1992) as she says “I guess he wanted something more and I felt kind of obligated to give it to him”.

Yet, despite postfeminist accounts of sex as something that women are choosing to do-- whether it be to please a partner, conform to societal pressures, or avoid consequences-- many women noted that refusing sex would be uncomfortable and in some cases not possible. For example, Participant 01 (26, Queer) recounts an experience of unwanted oral sex where she was staying with a family friend and had spent the entire evening trying to avoid his advances. She says “It was a huge night of me just trying to avoid his come ons and eventually I just got tired of it. Uh I was like fuck maybe if I just give him a blow job he’ll stop. Yeah, so I did. I- it was really annoying.” She positions acquiescence as the only option and one that she chose after considering other possibilities. She says: “I was at the point in my life that I understood that I could say no. And I like I don’t know if I even gave myself the option of trying to go there cause it was so situationally weird. Like I di- like if I said no and he kicked me out of his house like where would I go in [city] for the night.” Although Participant 01 highlights the various options that were available to her in this scenario and highlights that she was aware of them all (including the option to say no), all potential solutions come with negative consequences, whether it be overriding her own desire and having oral sex or refusing sex and having nowhere to stay for the night. As Participant 01 implies, all choices are not equal in this context and acquiescence is the least threatening option in the moment.

Oral sex also became an alternative to engaging in sexual intercourse when that was not desired. For example, Participant 04 (23, Queer) talks about a painful sexual experience where she says “I gave him a blow job, not because I actually wanted to give him a blow job, because I was thinking “he’s not putting that thing in me, again”. But I also don’t want to disappoint him because I want a relationship with him.” Her lack of desire is explicitly addressed but then dismissed; sexual refusal is not even verbalized as an option if she wants to keep alive the possibility of a relationship. Instead, oral sex becomes a viable solution that will allow her to avoid physical pain while complying with implicit relationship pressures. Participant 07 (26, Straight) differentiates between oral sex and intercourse when asked if she has ever agreed to have sex she did not want to have (“I wouldn’t say intercourse but um I gave someone a blow job where I said yes but I didn’t want to”). She recounts an experience with a stranger where he asked for a blow job and she says “I didn’t really want to give him a blow job but he didn’t seem dangerous and he wasn’t dis- wasn’t being disrespectful to me or anything so I felt comfortable giving him one as well but I didn’t really want to give him one at all but just yeah he kinda seemed pathetic so [...] Yeah so I didn’t feel bad about doing it or anything it was just I really didn’t want to do it but I just did it”. Participant 07 (26, Straight) uses considerable disclaimer language as she negotiates that he “wasn’t disrespectful” and that she “was comfortable” and yet “she didn’t want to do it”. Here, the stranger’s manners and desires override her repeated exclamation that she did not want to engage in sex. Her positioning of him as “pathetic” colludes with dominant discourses about heterosex where men *require* sex. Further, her assertion that he is harmless obscures explicit pressure and removes danger from the situation. What are the consequences of overriding her own desires in the name of heterosex?

Taking into account the context in which oral sex is positioned as lesser on the hierarchy

of sexual activity, it appears as if oral sex can be seen as a compromise between having intercourse and outright refusing sex. This is not a compromise that comes without consequence, however, as participants described “not wanting” to do it and talked about these experiences in the context of agreeing to unwanted sex or ‘bad’ sex. Further, in participants’ articulations of what counts as sex, some women re-considered the unitary understanding of sex as intercourse by noting that they felt that oral sex was actually a more intimate activity for them. Thus, the conceptualization of oral sex as less significant than engaging in intercourse is reflective of heteronormative rules rather than individual experiences.

### **‘Mental Gymnastics’: Negotiating Consent and Desire in Practice**

Participant 03 (25, Straight\*) terms the negotiation between one’s own desires and the perceived necessity to please (and thereby not disappoint) a partner as a sort of “mental gymnastics”. On the one hand, there is a perceived obligation to agree to sex in order to satisfy expected relationship practices and thereby please one’s partner. On the other hand, however, she talks about rationalizing this practice so as not to appear untrue to herself.

When asked about agreeing to sex that was unwanted (i.e., consensual but unwanted sex, see Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007a), some participants noted that these were stories that had already been recounted when talking about bad sex, highlighting the end of the spectrum where bad sex is equated with sex that is unwanted (see above for examples). It is important to note here that the words ‘consent’ and ‘desire’ were intentionally omitted from the interviewer’s questions as they are terms heavily laden with cultural meanings. Often contradictory and competing discourses of sex as an inevitable relationship requirement (lacking choice) and engaging sex as an active choice suffused their talk. In talking about agreeing to unwanted sex, two contradictory discourses emerged which are tethered to neoliberal ideas: the relationship

compromise discourse and the neoliberal choice discourse.

**Deciding or desiring?: Competing discourses of neoliberal choice and relationship imperatives.** In contrast to the risk avoidance discourses, participants spoke of agreeing to unwanted sex in order to maintain a relationship (‘relationship hygiene’: Brown-Bowers et al., 2015) or to build a relationship/have a partner like them. In some instances, ‘bad’ sex was positioned as synonymous with sex that someone agreed to but did not want to have. That is, in several interviews when participants were asked to “tell me about a time where you agreed to have sex that you did not want to have”, women referenced the same experience that they had described when asked about bad sex. These accounts will be described in further detail in the following section of analysis.

***Relationships are all about compromise.*** In line with existing literature on sexual consent (e.g., Burkett & Hamilton, 2012), it appears as if women’s sexual encounters (with men) are influenced by implicit pressures to conform to gendered norms and practices. In the context of a relationship, the have/hold discourse positions sex as a compulsory gift from women to men in order to maintain a relationship (Hollway, 1989). As participants’ often competing and contradictory accounts have highlighted, consent is a precarious concept when compulsory sexual agency (i.e., all sexual choices are freely made: Gill, 2008b) is navigated in the context of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007; 2008b) where conflicting messages about autonomous choice and surveillance converge.

I feel like... you know, relationships are all about compromise. Um, you do a lot of things you don’t want to, whether it’s “Can you go to the grocery store and pick something up?” “Not that I really want to, like, I want to go to yoga. But I *will* because you want me to”. Um, I don’t think sex is any different at that point in time... Obviously,

if I have a very bad headache and he says “Let’s have sex” and I say “No, I have a headache”, I want him to respect that? But if it’s me just...me just not really- I-I-I mean, I would say eight times out of ten, I would always say... “Yeah I’ll- I’ll- we can have sex” even if I *don’t* really want to do it because I know they really want to do it, and I want to make them feel good.” (Participant 14 (30, Straight))

In the above excerpt, consent is positioned as a compromise in the same way that going to the grocery store even though one does not want to is navigated. This parallel drawn between having sex and begrudgingly going to the grocery store positions sex on the same playing field as a very low-risk, mundane activity. Sex is equated with a chore; which is by definition an unpleasant but necessary task. In this way, the provision of sex to suit a partner’s wishes override one’s own desires not to have sex. Participant 14 (30, Straight) further describes not having sex with a partner when he asks for it as “being selfish, being lazy, being inconsiderate.” She says: “I would say those times I was being inconsiderate and I would put the blame actually on me [...] I would negatively judge myself for not doing it at that point in time...and I would think that was selfish of me”. Sexual refusal is not only inconceivable, it is something for which she would negatively judge herself.

Participant 13 (24, Straight), positions engaging in unwanted sex as a sacrifice:

There were many times where I would have sex even though I didn’t want to just because he wanted to. So, like emotionally I still felt like I loved him, so I thought, you know, “Okay, I can do this for him”, but while we were actually having sex in my mind I was honestly just waiting for it to be over because it wasn’t something that I wanted to do in that moment (Participant 13 (24, Straight))

In this account, sex is positioned as an act of love where sacrifice must be made in order

to demonstrate one's love and therefore maintain a relationship. Similarly, Participant 05 (35, Bisexual) refers to an experience of sex with her long-term partner where she "just kind of went along with it" despite not being interested in having sex. She refers to this type of sex as "obligatory sex", implying that there is an obligation to engage in sex within a relationship, whether or not desire is present. This falls in line with the discourse of sex as something that "just happens". Participant 09 (26, Straight) says:

I think when I was younger I believed that having- when someone has sex with you when they wanted to have sex it meant that they liked you and that like they loved you and that was like a compliment it meant that you were special and and so um...I don't know I didn't have many friends growing up and I thought that I would never ever have a boyfriend cause uh I was really made fun of and teased in school and stuff so I guess I just...I don't wanna say took every chance that I got that- I-I wasn't like ...but-but um yeah there were definitely times where you know um...it felt like it wasn't right and I could feel it's-it...that person wasn't respecting me but uh but there's a chance that they could love me or it means something more so or maybe if I do it they- they will- they will love me more. (Participant 09 (26, Straight))

Similar to the accounts above of bad sex, Participant 09 references not only relationship pressures but also the 'internal societal pressure'. She says: "I had always wanted to remain a virgin until marriage that was always my intention and then my-my very first boyfriend he um... I was like he was the most popular guy in school too and I was like "oh my god I can't believe that not only do I have a boyfriend it's like someone who's like really wanted" so um and then but I had never planned on having sex that was just out of the question to me but then he wanted to fool around and I was like "okay well I guess we can you know so some things without having

sex” and then like eventually everyone in school was doing it and it was like the cool thing to do and so I was this like...you know well I was start-starting to reconsider my own values like maybe you know since it’s cool and I- do you know what I mean.” The social status that is afforded by having sex since it is “cool” quashes her values and leads her to reconsider her decision to remain a virgin until marriage. Sex appears to be a means of transcending social status in order to become accepted and recognized as “cool” on the social hierarchy. Here, the pressure to engage in sex is not directly experienced from a partner but operates from more subtle forms of invisible yet pervasive self-discipling power (Foucault, 1978).

Sexual refusal was also discussed in relation to media messages and implicit pressures. When asked about whether it is comfortable to refuse unwanted sex, Participant 06 (18, Pansexual) says: “Sometimes I’m just like I’ll suck it up. Um, I don’t know. Um, I don’t know why I do it ((laughter)) but yeah sometimes I do it. Sometimes I just suck it up, um, yeah.” She then engages in a negotiation between her own desire to say no, and media messages that encourage active and desiring sexual women (Gavey, 2005; Gill, 2007; 2009). She says: “Like it’s bad saying no sometimes, in a way like, we should be saying yes to sex all the time”. When asked why, she says: “It’s like, “oh we’re teenagers where like you just want to have sex”. And like, um, yeah I’m really open with sex. [...] Well it’s also media stuff like, like sexuality and media and like parents and all of that, it’s just really big like, we should always say yes to sex like even guys. Guys get a lot of pressure saying yes, cause like mens are pigs, all they want to do is have sex and all that. It’s a lot harder for them to say no cause if they say no they’re gonna get called like pussies of like yeah “you’re not a man for saying no” [...] Like even girls, they tell girls to say no to sex but like when they’re having sex they should say yes, you know. When they’re about to have sex they should say yes. But like outside, they should say no to sex.”

Participant 06's account invokes discourses of compulsory sexual performance, where the goal for women is not only to be sexually savvy and proficient, but to be 'perpetually prepared' (Gill, 2009; Gurevich et al., 2017) in complying with sexual advances. Participant 21 (19, Straight) invokes a discourse of reciprocity as she says "He'd be like, go down on me and I didn't really want to, then I did it anyway, just because I felt like I ha- just because I feel like you have to reciprocate...if someone does it to you also." When asked about why it is that you have to reciprocate she says "I think just because like, sex itself is a very like, reciprocal sort of process...um... so any time you have a sexual experience, you're just sort of just like, expected to reciprocate. Y'know like if someone does down on you, you do down on them. It's just like that." Her description of reciprocity as "just like that" implies that this is a well understood practice that either does not require explanation or that does not have an explanation. There is no room here for questioning, reconsidering, or resisting the accepted heterosexual dogma.

*Navigating neoliberal choice.* In the neoliberal postfeminist world that participants have described (and others have problematized), agreeing to or refusing sex is positioned as an active choice. However, as Burkett and Hamilton (2012) highlight, there is often a discrepancy between participants' discourses of agency and choice and their descriptions of feeling pressured. Participant 07 (26, Straight) explicitly references choice as the key determinant of what differentiates rape from 'bad' sex. She briefly mentions a time that she was raped and refers to that as "a different sort of topic altogether", noting that she had 'no choice' in the situation as she was intoxicated and unconscious. Implicit in her differentiation between the time she was raped and her other experiences of bad sex, is the notion that she had choice in all other accounts of 'bad' or unwanted sex that she describes.

Participants frequently mobilized a risk avoidance discourse in their accounts of agreeing



to have sex that was unwanted. Similar to women's accounts of 'bad' sex, they argued that agreeing to have sex that is not desired comes at a lower cost in some cases than the alternative, which is to face the consequences of saying no. This is positioned as an active choice. In one account, Participant 09 (26, Straight) describes a time in grade school that her best friend wanted her to give this guy a handjob because she had previously done it but did not want to again and wanted to avoid him getting mad. Participant 09 negotiates this account by saying "I'm not ready for this", but, like, I just convinced myself that it's just something that you'd feel uncomfortable doing" and she reflects thinking "this doesn't make sense, like, I know this is wrong, but I'm still going to do it". Her use of the agentic verb "I'm going to" positions this experience as an active decision on her part. She then says "I think about that and then it makes me upset. It's just like thinking about it not it's so stu(hh)pid, like, for doing that". By placing responsibility on herself for making the decision, the external pressure by her friend and the guy are masked and repackaged as a "stupid decision" that she made. What is missing in this account is an acknowledgement of all of the pressures that led to her saying yes and the "absence of a reliable language in which to say no" (Gavey, 2005, p. 157) to unwanted and uncomfortable sexual advances.

Many participants frame sex as a learning experience where one learns through negative experiences what one would not want to happen in the future (see also Bryant & Schofield, 2007). Participant 07 (26, Straight) engages in a neoliberal negotiation when she talks about how one learns from bad experiences and then in the future one wouldn't allow those things to happen again ("I won't let that happen again or you know I'll make sure I communicate better with the next one"). Here, all responsibility is placed on her to ensure that she is communicating properly. Participant 09 (26, Straight) differentiates between her younger self and her current

self. She says “It happened a lot mostly when I was younger and I had low self-esteem for sure it still happens sometimes but...”. She then goes on to describe how now when she will agree to unwanted sex, for example when she is tired she will say “hey I’m not really in the mood if you want to you can but I’m just gonna lay there.” The difference between this account and the one highlighted above with her high school boyfriend is that she says that her boyfriend won’t “do anything” after that because according to him that would be “boring”.

Participant 01 (26, Queer) invokes discourses of neoliberal choice in describing the cost benefit analysis of either refusing sex or engaging in unwanted sex. She says: “I like I trust myself like I-I’m pretty solid with the consequences of what happened if I chose either one of these roads um and like I said I’m pretty ok with the consequences of continuing having sex that I’m not like into it’s just easier for me. Um but if there’s a situation of high risk like I’m feeling super super anxious or unsafe or not ready and just like not present at all, yes I’m totally fine being like no, can’t do this, we gotta chage this.”

Participant 02 (29, Straight\*) talks about how she would prefer to try and have sex even when she is not initially interested. When asked if there are ever times where she engages in undesired sex she says: “Yeah, I’ll just do it anyway like I don’t feel like it’s violating or anything like that towards and it’s not like throughout the thing I’m thinking like “oh my gosh I don’t like this at all” I’m maybe just not that excited or turned on. Um but I’m still- at the same time I’m still happy to have the experience with him too. It’s not this, it’s not comp- like it’s a mixture of feelings, it’s not this complete like I don’t like this but I’m doing in anyway. [...] I’ll do it anyway knowing it’s my own choice to do it an not feel like I had to yeah.” When asked about whether it would be comfortable to refuse sex she says: “I think I would feel bad. Cause I’d feel like it’s kinda unne- needless like it’s ya know, it’s- he’s not asking me to do this big

thing um, like I'd feel bad, I'd feel like maybe he thought that like I wasn't desiring him or something like that. I'd sorry that he'd take it personally and so for me it's not worth that [...] and I don't know that he would um, and so maybe there is part of me in there that feels like I can't say no cause like he might take it personally. But at the same time I don't feel trapped in the situation cause it's not that big of a deal to have sex like I don't feel like "oh my gosh no no no" like it's not that big of a deal like I rather yeah um, just have sex and for him not to feel upset." In this account she describes refusing sex with her husband as something that she would feel bad about and asserts that the cost of her engaging in unwanted sex is less than her husband being upset. She later notes that she would be able to refuse sex with other people (she is in an open relationship) highlighting the 'sex as relationship compromise' discourse.

Similarly, Participant 13's (24, Straight) account exemplifies the complexities inherent in negotiating relationship compromise and neoliberal choice:

It was because his sex drive was a lot higher than mine, so there were... many times where I would have sex even though I didn't want to just because he wanted to. So, like, emotionally I still felt like I loved him, so I thought, you know, "Okay, I can do this for him", but while we were actually having sex in my mind I was honestly just waiting for it to be over because it wasn't something that I wanted to do in that moment. Yeah, so that would be the worst. (Participant 13 (24, Straight))

When asked about resistance, Participant 13 noted that she has only been able to resist twice "successfully", meaning that she said no and her partner actually stopped. In all other instances, she noted that her partner would try to persuade her by saying things like "Oh, C'mon, I'm sure I can change your mind", "Let's keep kissing", "Let me keep touching you". Participant 13 says: "I would say "no", but he would change my mind. I mean he wouldn't

actually effectively change my mind, but, like he would convince me to have sex anyway even though in my mind I was thinking “I don’t want to””. She describes that engaging in sex she did not want to have was easier than directly refusing sex as that would lead to an argument where her partner would internalize her refusal by saying things like “Oh what did I do? Why are you mad at me?”. She emphasizes that engaging in sex was an active choice and disclaims the interpretation that the sex was non-consensual or pressured. She says:

I do want to say... um, I think it’s... coming out in a way.... that’s like I wasn’t given my consent or something, which wasn’t the case. It was just me kind of... thinking “Okay, I understand this person has a higher drive than me and I love him, I want to make him happy. So... I’ll do this for him” kind of thing. It was never like I felt... pressured like I couldn’t say “No”. It just - it was something... that I thought I should do to make him happy. Like, I did make that decision, I just... - yeah, I wasn’t enjoying it in that moment.  
(Participant 13 (24, Straight))

Here, engaging in unwanted sex is positioned as an active choice to make her partner happy despite the fact that she was not enjoying it in the moment. Individualized discourses of sexual agency and free choice echo Foucault’s notion of a self-regulating disciplinary power (Foucault, 1978) where societal pressures are repackaged as an individual regulatory practice that one controls. Key tenets of neoliberalism pepper these accounts— rhetorics of individuality and choice— where women are positioned as acting autonomously, enthusiastically and benevolently in order to please their male partner. Ability to please is positioned as a stabilizing determinant of one’s status as a ‘good partner’. Yet, engaging in sex despite “not wanting to” is repeated throughout accounts as a choice that one makes in order to maintain a relationship or avoid negative consequences. The potential impossibility of saying no, which Participant 13

highlights, is oft not considered and rather many participants considered themselves “lucky” that experiences were not worse.

**Getting ‘lucky’?: Averting worst-case scenarios.** Many participants invoked a discourses of “luck”, “hoping”, and “wishing” to situate experiences of ‘bad’ or unwanted sex in relation to experiences that ‘could have been worse’. This is in stark contrast to the positioning of sex as something that they had active choice in (described above). Participant 20 (22, Straight) references “hope” when describing her first sexual encounter. She says: “My very first time. It’s not like I didn’t want to, but I was just hoping it wouldn’t happen”. She disclaims against the interpretation that sex was unwanted, and instead references her “hope” that it would not happen. Yet, later in her account says “I didn’t wanna” referencing her absence of desire to have sex in that moment. The way in which this sexual account is constructed is as something that she had no choice in, that “happened” despite her refusal:

I was like “no no no no no” right? And so, all of a sudden, like I guess he...cause he’s pretty strong, he ended up taking it out [her vagina] and going “I already saw it, I already saw it” [...] and then we just like fucked. (Participant 20, (22, Straight))

Not only was her refusal ignored, but she references his physical strength as a force that would trump her lack of desire, rendering halting the encounter futile. She describes this encounter as something completely devoid of feeling and emotion, something that she and her partner never talked about after and something that she “wish it didn’t happen”.

In reflecting on times where she let cases of unwanted sex “run its course”, Participant 07 (26, Straight) reflects that it “didn’t happen that often luckily”. Participant 07 describes her partner in similar fortuitous terms: “Luckily enough I found a really good person so it’s been easy to allow myself to have the relationship that I wanna have which allows me to have the

sexual relationship that I wanna have as well”. Here she is talking about how communication is incredibly important to her and being with a “really good person”, which is something that he controls, has afforded her the ability to have the kind of relationship that she would want to have.

Participant 05 (35, Bisexual) refers to the shift in her relationship between the earlier years where sex often occurred without desire to the present day where she and her partner have developed a very open communication in their relationship generally and within sexual encounters. She says: “I’m very lucky that I have somebody that I can have that open communication with”. In a similar manner, Participant 12 (31, Straight) distinguishes herself from “young girls” in that she has reached a point in her life where she’s “reach[ed] the age where I know exactly what I like” and notes that this was facilitated by the fact that her partner is “attentive” and “accomodating” to her needs and pleasure. She chalks this up to luck as she says: “I’m very lucky, but unfortunately there a lot of young girls out there who aren’t so lucky and I really feel for them”. “I’m very lucky I’ve been with guys who are considerate of my needs, who are great men.” These “great men” are positioned as a statistical rarity, positioning attention to pleasure as a luxury rather than a right.

When asked about the end of sex, Participant 14 (30, Straight) notes that she has been “fortunate” because although sex ends with male ejaculation, she has most often had an orgasm prior to this. The language of luck implies a rarity, one that is to be cherished and celebrated when achieved, but not to be expected or demanded. When communication with a partner and their ability to listen to refusals *and* respect these wishes are framed as something that cannot be expected nor controlled, the neoliberal idea of choice re-enacted and the “luck” repertoire is contradictory. How can one ensure that a partner will listen to a sexual refusal when their ability to do so is framed in terms of ‘luck’? Is this only something that one can ‘hope’ or ‘wish’ for?

### **Doing desire: Perils and possibilities of transcending dominant sex scripts.**

According to participants, the way that sex is initiated and sexual desire is communicated in practice is most often physical (although a few participants do note that initiation is sometimes verbal). Even at times where sex is initiated verbally in the beginning, the way in which partners transition from one sexual activity to another is most often physical (e.g., “mostly it’s just actions and then we just go with the flow”, P04 (23, Queer)). This is consistent with studies on sexual consent behaviour (e.g., Beres et al., 2004; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Humphreys, 2005) which have illustrated that non-verbal behaviours are more common than verbal communication to obtain consent in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships despite research demonstrating that sexual self-disclosure (i.e., voicing sexual desires to one’s partner) leads to a greater sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2009). This is deeply entrenched in dominant messages that suggest that communication disrupts the sexiness and spontaneity (“if you spell it all out, it’s no longer s(hh)exy”, P03 (25, Straight\*)). Consent campaigns such as *Consent is Sexy* attempts to shift this view, however as participants describe, verbal communication is still not often the first line of sexual communication. For some women, the lack of verbal communication can come at a heavy cost. As one participant describes, sexual initiation through physical touching can feel intrusive and even violating. She says:

He'll like start touching me in specific body areas? And and then when I mentioned before if I'm not like turned on in that moment that is intrusive to me. Like I'll I'll actually c-like it's a bit violating like you start touching me before I'm like even wanting to go there? (Participant 03 (25, Straight\*))

When asked about what would be a more comfortable way for her partner way she noted that simply asking (“even like talking about it and being like what do you want right now”)

would make her feel more comfortable and would alleviate the pressure to have intercourse. Many participants asserted that the way in which sex is initiated physically leaves little room for a dialogue about desire. In talking about times where her partner initiates sex and she is not in the mood, Participant 03 will either be unresponsive or will respond by recoiling. She then reflects that his initiation is “not the way to do it in that moment”:

I: Um what would be the way to do it?

P03: Even like talking about it and being like what do you want right now or like I’ll- let’s go upstairs I’ll give you a massage like even him suggesting that would already make me feel like it’s less tense or I don’t feel pressure to like take off my clothes right away and like um have se- intercourse.

She explains that this would be a much better way to initiate rather than “just like grabbing” in order to make her feel more relaxed. However, she expresses concern that voicing this solution will disrupt expectations of heterosex and their relationship. She says “but then I worry like if I’m offending him or hurting his feelings or changing the dynamic in some way in our relationship”. In this way, her own desires are at risk of offending her partner if they differ from his expectations. Voicing desire is painted as a risky business and therefore she chooses not to voice this, but rather notes that this is an internal process. She wonders whether this would be a helpful discussion if it turns out that he is satisfied with their progression of sex (“I might feel like um is that really helpful to discuss that right now like maybe he’s fine”). She notes that she does not say anything about her lack of desire or emotional experience after sex as she notes that he would not understand, but that she instead frames her experience in terms of physical sensations. She says: “what I do say though it I’ like sorry I’m like really physically tense- I try to keep it more physical so that he understands it cause I don’t really think he gets



like sort of the more emotional aspects of it or sort of like the psyche aspects of it? I don't think he gets that. So like I keep it really like physiological so he can relate somehow." Participant 03 describes a discord between her own and her partner's experiences during sex; she needs to be in a good emotional space in order to want sex whereas she perceives her partner's experience to be entirely physical. Not only is her partner eager and able to have sex without worrying about his emotional state but she assumes that he does not understand the "psyche aspects" of sexual (non)desire, which is in keeping with dominant account of men's sexuality as governed by one of 'two brains' (the penis brain versus the mind brain) (Potts, 2002). The construction of hegemonic masculinity that positions the penis as controlled by a primal instinct ('penis brain') allows men to experience sex as primarily corporeal, where rational thinking ('mind brain') is overridden by biology. She notes that when she has tried to verbalize what she wants in the past her partner has called her pushy ("because before I have been like " can you do it this way" and been like been more detailed in the steps and he said that I was being pushy"). This is described as a "gender norm" where she wonders "I'm supposed to be more passive?".

Similarly, Participant 01 (26, Queer) draws a line between physical enjoyment and internal desire as she describes what she will do when she is not enjoying sex. She says:

I don't think that I do anything to be totally honest. I think um- I mean if I'm physcailly not enjoying it like if it's hurting I'll just switch positions. Um if I'm not enjoying sex because I don't wanna be having sex with the person and I realize that halfway through, um I'll usually just keep going until, until it's over. And like I won't like I won't try to initiate more and like when they're done I'll just kick them out. But that's just an eas- like I know in my head like that's an easier situation than being like ((knock on table)) we gotta stop I don't wanna do this anymore. (Participant 01 (26, Queer))

She uses agentic language in her account (“I’ll keep going”), implying that engaging in sex is the “easier” choice but at the same time highlighting the difficulties and consequences attached to refusing sex. When asked about what it would be like to ask to stop sex, Participant 01 reflects that she has attempted that once in the past with her partner and that “he got really upset” and that it led to a “big conversation”. She notes that he did not understand the importance of listening to a “no” until she explained her history of sexual assault to him to which he responds “fuck I’m really sorry I didn’t know”. His reaction is framed in terms of a lack of education (“I get that cause men aren’t- they’re not given that education and like I appreciate that”) and as something that could be prevented with proper education.

When asked about how she talks about whether she talks about what she likes and does not like with a partner Participant 02 (29, Straight\*) further reflects the difficulty in verbally voicing desiring. She says: “I’d feel reluctant to express what I don’t like cause I’m worried that it’s going to um discourage the other person or like ruin the mood uh or offend them um so sometimes I just wouldn’t like I wouldn’t say anything. Unless it was so uncomfortable I couldn’t stand it and then I’d just wait til later to like bring it up”. (Non)consent is described as grey, as something only to voice when sex is “so uncomfortable [you] couldn’t stand it”. Participant 10 (20, Bisexual) describes how there are times where there is no opportunity to say no:

I think there definitely is like a difference between there being no consent and then there- like there being like me saying no consent and then there being like not really a question or answer where it’s just like this grey are where like you didn’t ask but I also didn’t say no and it’s like a weird, it was weird, it was a tough experience but I think that like definitely set a precedent where it’s like I’m never gonna like I’m gonna look at all the

warning signs for what that gave me in the future. [...] There's not clear consent when you don't say yes I think that's like really important and like consent culture is being like if no one said yes it's not clear consent like there isn't just like a like there's either an excited yes yes yes yes or there's like then it's not the same um and I think like that's where it drops into this weird area where it's like maybe they didn't say yes or maybe you didn't ask or maybe it just wasn't clear [...] I think there is definitely a grey area where it's like I didn't have the opportunity to like say yes" (Participant 10 (20, Bisexual))

Participant 10's account highlights the unavailability of language outside of consent culture injunctions and the conceptual impossibility of understanding an unwanted sexual experience as nonconsensual where consent was entirely absent from the conversation. In describing how she would categorize this experience she had previously said: "I wouldn't say I was like- it was definitely sexually abusive, I wouldn't say it was rape though but it was like he put me in a position where I couldn't- I didn't feel like I was okay to say no and even though I did say no and I kept being like "no no no this doesn't feel right" which like takes all the sexiness out of it, your partner being like "I'm not- no I don't wanna do this" but it was just like he had been drinking it was so much about his experience and like I just remember laying there and like looking at the ceiling and being like "someone's just having sex with my body right now like I'm not here at all"". Her distinction between the terms sexually abusive and rape imply that there is something about this encounter that does not meet the standard definition of rape. While she highlights that there was no question from her partner as to whether she wanted to have sex (and therefore no opportunity to respond and refuse sex), she does describe that she expressed her nonconsent and nondesire on several occasions. This "grey" area that she describes is

important to consider as it would appear that the rules of consent delineated by consent campaigns and popular understandings of consent do not always capture the complexities of negative and unwanted experiences where consent is not a straightforward question and answer. Although education efforts have often asserted that silence or a lack of obtaining consent cannot be equated with a yes, this account illuminates that these caveats are not as commonly taken up in how young women understand and enact consent in practice. If sex without consent is rape, then how do we understand sex where consent is completely removed from the equation?

Participant 05 (35, Bisexual) offers possibilities for transcending the constraints of heteronormative communication practices. Where she has previously had difficulty refusing unwanted sex, she and her partner of fifteen years have more recently developed a language to communicate consent and desire with each other following an explicit conversation several years ago where they agreed to voice what they each needed and to accommodate that. For example, if one partner is tired and the other wants to have sex then they can communicate about how it might be possible to accommodate both needs (“I need to go to bed so he can, you know jerk off to porn”). She acknowledges how difficult it can be to engage in these types of dialogues as she says: “I think again, it’s personalized in a lot of ways. Thinking that you’re, not good enough or you’re not meeting your partner’s expectations, or I know in the past I’ve had partners that had felt really bad if they couldn’t make you climax, or that it was their responsibility, like your sex life was their responsibility, right”.

Participant 20 (22, Straight) highlights the difficulties inherent not only in voicing her desires but in thinking about what she wants internally. In describing how she and her partner typically discuss what they like and do not like sexually she says, “He asked me if I like it or I don’t like it. Or what I like and don’t like because...like, for me personally like I-I... I don’t

know. You know what I mean? Like as weird as that sounds, I should know what I like and don't like, but like I never analyze it to see like, do I really like this or do I don't really? Like he asks me and I find it hard to answer because like, I can't express myself". Her account reads as shameful and she is responsible for not knowing what she wants, for not being a proper "sexual entrepreneur (Gill, 2009). And yet, situated in a context where she talks about how she was not brought up to express herself generally, let alone when exploring sexual desire, it is understandable that desire is doubly absent here.

### **“Everyone Is Doing It But No One Is Talking About It”: Societal Silence, Sex Education, and the Need to Start a More Expansive Conversation**

Talk of (sex) education emerged in many interviews as something that could have both enhanced the pursuit of sexual pleasure and prevented negative sexual experiences. Sex education approaches have often centered on abstinence and risk avoidance, leaving 'discourses of desire' entirely absent from the conversation (Fine 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006). High school students have critiqued the de-eroticized nature of sex education and called for content that addresses pleasurable sexual activity (Allen, 2008). Acknowledging the problematic invisibility of desire and pleasure in sex education, researchers have proposed the inclusion of a 'discourse of erotics' that promotes conversations about desire, pleasure, and how these are embodied in practice in order to transgress narrow views about sexuality (Albury, 2014; Allen 2004; 2005; Carmody, 2005). While sex education was not an explicit part of interview questions, many participants referenced the (lack of) knowledge instilled to them by parents and more often formal sex education. In many cases, participants described an emphasis on prevention (e.g., of pregnancy, STIs, rape) rather than pleasure and how to negotiate desire both internally and relationally (i.e., communicating consent). Participants instead referenced friends

and more often media as their primary sources of learning about sex. Many participants spoke of media as an instrumental conduit for knowledge translation, but unfortunately one that perpetuates negative labels and presents a narrow view of sexuality<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, on several occasions, participants highlighted the limited number of sexual possibilities that are constrained by the categories and shackles of the heteronormative script. Gendered messages ascribed to certain sexual acts further restrict women's pursuit of pleasure:

I didn't really have any way to kind of communicate that and usually what would end up happening is um, he would climax, and I would – he would go to the bathroom and usually I would finish myself off ((laughter)) [...] But I didn't have any way to communicate that to him, that he wasn't satisfying me in the same way or what I wanted or, like I didn't even know. Cause I think that's part of um, just how we're socialized as women, we're told – even if it's not explicit, right, we're still taught don't be sexual, don't, you know, don't ask for those things. (Participant 05, 35, Bisexual)

Participant 05 (35, Bisexual) points to her internalization of “how we're socialized as women” as silencing her ability to communicate what she wanted sexually in the past for fear of being “labelled as slutty” or being anything other than ‘nice’. She highlights the murkiness of competing and often contradictory messages where boys are positioned as narrators of sexual experience, all-knowing sexperts (“they're just supposed to know what they're doing”), despite their similar lack of education about sex and the common turn to porn as sex pedagogy (Gurevich et al., 2017). In this vein, women are positioned as passive recipients to male sexual advances (Hollway, 1989) who lack a language to communicate their own desires. Participant 03

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<sup>6</sup> Note that this section includes a limited discussion of participants' talk of possibilities for education. A fuller discussion will follow in a subsequent publication.

(25, Straight\*) also sources outside of her own embodied desires and notes that it is impossible to tease apart her own ideas about sex and those instilled to her by societal messages:

Participant 03: I can't like decipher what's my own uh uh standard versus like standards that I've absorbed from like other sources. I- sometimes they're so like intermixed that I can't tease them apart. [...] like knowing how kind of like boys act in middle school too? Like they can be rude with their comments and I just like when I was like thirteen I had this really unwanted sexual like encounter with this fourteen year old boy who basically like, like I would say it was sexual assault um like forced his hands down my pants like uh when we were like walking home from school in like an alley.

I: I'm really sorry that happened.

P03: Yeah. But it just shows how common it is like I think this is probably a common experience for young girls yeah and then that like knowing that so early on you sort of get this opinion of like what men need or want from women to be happy.

In the above excerpt, sexual violence is positioned as a “common experience” for young girls, one that sends messages about gender and the ‘way boys are’. Participant 03 (25, Straight\*) cites this experience of sexual assault as a moment where she learned and internalized the notion that men require sex from women “to be happy”. Her use of the verbs “need” and “want” position sex as something that may merely be a desire, but that could also be framed in discourses of biology where sex is a *need*. Similar to many accounts in the above sections of analysis, participants frequently referenced their own sexual experiences as sites of learning, whether learning about their own desire or absorbing gendered norms and therefore knowing what to avoid in the future. However, this learning most commonly occurred in the context of ‘bad’ or unwanted sexual experiences, where women described ensuring that nothing bad ever

happened again in their sexual relationships. This learning through ‘trial and error’ approach is detrimental in two significant ways: 1) women are positioned as responsible for educating themselves and preventing ‘bad’ sex thereby locating partners outside of the problem and, 2) these ‘bad’ and unwanted experiences often have negative physical and emotional impacts. Are there ways of situating these experiences as a “common experience” that requires intervention on a societal level? How can we shift the conversation to not only “stop the worst of bad sex” (Beres, Senn, & McCaw, 2014, p. 774) but to place desire and pleasure at center stage?

Participant 08 (20, Straight) named a desire to talk about sex education as the primary reason for wanting to participate in the research interview. Here she recounts a negative sexual experience in high school which resulted in pregnancy-- an experience that she had not previously discussed in the context of bad sex or unwanted sex. She notes that her sex education course typified a risk avoidance approach to sexual violence prevention but offered little other information about how to talk about consent and desire or what to do if you did get pregnant (“We learned like no for rape and stuff but you didn’t learn how to have like real conversations like “oh what are you comfortable with like do you wanna try this”). According to her account, what was missing from her sex education was a conversation about how to explore what you were comfortable with and to express that to a partner. This is important both in terms of thinking about one’s own desire and how to communicate that with a partner. In reflecting on what would have made a difference in her past negative sexual experiences, Participant 08 says:

Um I think knowing what you’re-not like getting yourself into like it’s something so crazy but like what you’re about to take on and how many risks there are and how many benefits there can be and what are the benefits like what is orgasming like what feels good and also being able to like talk to your partner about stuff that you want because I



feel like a lot of like high school relationships and stuff like everyone's having sex but no one's talking about like...like if I wanted to do something with a guy I don't think I would like in high school I don't think I would have ever been like "oh do you wanna try this position like this might feel good" like I don't think I ever would have done that um because I didn't like know how to talk about it like talking about sex is like such a good thing like it helps everyone like it helps your parents it helps you like you don't end up pregnant at fifteen because you can have conversations about birth control(hh) um just getting comfortable about it and talking about it and learning that it's not like some crazy thing that needs to be hidden away like everyone's doing it. (Participant 08 (20, Straight))

In the above excerpt, the "benefits" of having sex and thinking about what "feels good" are highlighted as central to risk avoidance and breaking the societal silence on pleasure and 'good' sex. Yet, it appears as if a "discourse of desire is still missing" (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006) from classroom conversation, along with possibilities for exploring pleasure. From women's accounts of sex education, as well as voicing what would be necessary to feel comfortable refusing unwanted sex, communication (as a necessary precondition for comfort) peppered women's accounts. This highlights the need to start a more expansive conversation both in and outside of the bedroom. If we are to shift the sex education approach from risk avoidance to one that encourages conversations about consent, desire, and communication, it is essential that we consider the challenges (i.e., gendered norms, taboos, conditions for choice) inherent in voicing these and at the same time listen to participants' attempts at meaning making outside of the current cultural vernacular where women are placed in a conflicted role, being both encouraged to be desiring sexual subjects and to be sexually passive.

## Conclusion

This study sought to challenge dominant and taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as sex, what it means to have good and bad sex, and how consent and desire are negotiated in practice. Within research, many concepts remain poorly defined and are reiterations of dominant discourses infused with gender and power dynamics (see Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Further, the stories that tend to be privileged over others are largely reflective of these dominant power structures (Gavey, 1989; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2011). In our Western cultural locale, dominant constructions and popularized discourses about sex are predominantly framed in heterosexual terms that prioritize male sexual pleasure and position intercourse as the pinnacle of sexual experience (Potts, 2000) despite assertions that other forms of sex can be more pleasurable (e.g., Nicolson & Burr, 2003). These constructions exclude many voices (e.g., female, various sexual orientations, ethnic backgrounds, and intersecting identities) and are lacking diversity in representation. Missing in these narratives are critical analyses of what these concepts actually *mean* to individuals, how ‘concepts travel’ in sexological and popular discourses (see Fahs & McClelland, 2016), and how these constructions both restrict and expand possibilities for individual and mutual pleasure.

As highlighted in the analysis, these widely circulated dominant ideas are both regurgitated and resisted by participants. In many cases, participants questioned hegemonic heteronormative discourses and offered counter-narratives that better aligned with their sexual experiences. However, counter-normative practices and notes of resistance may be trumped in situations where a partner’s sense of self is fragile (Lafrance et al., in press) as bolstered by masculine ideals. When penile-vaginal intercourse is positioned as the ultimate sexual experience, consent is framed as a verbal “yes or no” question, and consent and desire are treated

as synonymous, we risk silencing possibilities for pleasure that are not privileged and at the same time ignoring accounts of sex that are unwanted and have negative emotional consequences. When a multitude of taken-for-granted definitions converge to supply standards for sexual practices, we risk obscuring unequal power relations under the guise of a postfeminist ethos that frames societal coercion as individual choice (Gavey, 2005; Rich 1980).

For example, women's talk of good sex is often discrepant with the way female sexuality is portrayed in popular media. In popular sex advice magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, good sex is most often described in terms of technique (e.g., a 'technology of sexiness' that instructs the body to achieve orgasm, Frith, 2015b) and women are provided with advice on how to please men by enhancing their sexual skill (e.g., Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2007; 2009). The liberated woman is now not only permitted to engage in promiscuous behaviour, but is expected to perform proficiently (Gurevich et al., 2017). However, in the interviews women resisted discourses of sex as solely physically performative and instead stressed the importance of creating a culture of consent, communication, and comfort. As one participant highlighted, she much prefers sex that fosters communication although she previously engaged in a lot of 'party girl sex' (performative physical sex) rooted in cultural norms. Where media play a key role in knowledge dissemination, media are in a powerful position to either maintain the (heteronormative, male centered) status quo or to disrupt it (see Thomas, Lafrance, & Stelzl, 2017). Shedding light on what women describe as good sex, and further considering the conditions required for 'intimate justice' (McClelland, 2010) such as freedom from harm and coercion, as well as entitlement to pleasure, is important for enhancing intimate lives.

Further, there exists a paradox where we live in a hypersexual culture (Levy, 2005) and yet individuals' own experiences with sex are often silenced and relegated to the sphere of

inappropriate or are constructed as taboo. As one participant notes, “everyone is doing it but no one is talking about it”. By maintaining a culture of silence around people’s lived experiences of desire and (dis)pleasure, people then turn to media and other popular culture sources to learn about sex. These sources can have pernicious influences as they are skewed to highlight taken for granted assumptions about what it means to have good and bad sex, and a particular version of how consent and desire ought to be navigated.

Risk avoidance remains a dominant approach to sexual violence prevention and sex education (Beres, 2014). However, from these interviews and research conducted by others (e.g., Basile, 1999; Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012) it has emerged that women do not always feel comfortable or able to refuse sex that is unwanted. There are numerous material and discursive conditions that propagate a fusion between agency, consent and subtle forms of societal coercion. When sexual consent is framed as a negotiation between two individuals, we are losing sight of the societal power structures and gendered rules that cannot be disentangled. As Burkett and Hamilton (2012) have argued, “the ‘just say no’ approach to sexual consent is deeply problematic in light of the contradictory ways in which women’s empowerment is assumed within postfeminist discourses whilst making ongoing gender imbalances” (p. 815). The lines are indeed muddled and murky when considering the context in which men’s advice (e.g., in the pick-up artist community) positions consent as something only to consider and then overcome when resistance occurs (Cosma & Gurevich, under review). Additionally, as research has demonstrated, direct refusals are not culturally normative (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999) and further there are many reasons why women report acquiescence to unwanted sex, from wanting to please a partner (e.g., Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012) to evading possible violence (Basile, 1999). Thus, when

women are positioned as gatekeepers of sex (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012) who are responsible for either agreeing or refusing sex under the postfeminist guise of autonomy and free choice, unequal power relations are obscured and experiences of unwanted sex are either framed as a choice or as “just (bad) sex” (Gavey, 2005; Thomas et al., 2016). Finally, as my research and others have shown (e.g., Beres, 2010), consent is not often negotiated verbally in practice. As highlighted in the analysis, physical initiation is much more common than verbal negotiation and in many cases, these physically initiated sexual experiences are consensual and wanted. Thus, a lack of verbal agreement to engage in sex does not necessarily imply a lack of consent or a lack of desire. Indeed, many participants actually articulated the opposite—that sexual initiation was typically non-verbal in times where it was desired and that sexual refusals were most often verbal (that is, when it was safe and comfortable to refuse sex). It is important that we recognize the complexities of relying on verbal communication to agree to or refuse sex given cultural taboos around talking about sex and the inadequacy of social vocabularies to negotiate arenas where consent and desire are not as clear.

If we are to interrupt the subtle operating processes that prop up hegemonic masculinity and revisit the ethics of consent, then we must engage in a critical process of deconstruction and reconstruction (Teo, 2015) where a critique of heterosex “take[s] the center stage to fully develop the critical lens necessary for tackling how sexuality becomes enmeshed with expectations and norms that inevitably create hierarchies” (Fahs & McClelland, 2016, p. 14). Understanding that sexual subjectivity is contextually inseparable from constructs of politics, culture, and history, we must critically analyze the conditions that create and maintain the ‘cultural scaffolding of rape’ (Gavey, 2005). Although seven participants had previously had sex with both men and women, they chose to speak exclusively to their experiences with men when

referring to the constraints of dominant sex scripts, and the pressures to engage in ‘bad’ or unwanted sex. At other times, for example while describing the typical sequence of sex and how sex ends, participants elected to speak to their sexual experiences with men and women separately. The gendered distinction in participant accounts between sex with men and sex with women coheres with the notion that there is nothing inherent or natural about how sex happens (see Foucault 1978; Tiefer, 2004) but rather that these scripts are a product of the patriarchal context in which norms are invisibly (re)produced and policed. In fact, accounts of sex with women allowed space for the exploration of diverse possibilities for pleasure by deviating from the shackles of hetero-scripts. Further, in telling stories of ‘bad’ and unwanted sex, several women noted that these were accounts that they had not previously shared or that they had only shared once. The choice to participate in the interview and willingness to share these accounts speaks to the lack of available language and conditions to speak to these experiences in everyday life. If we are to disrupt these binding discourses, we must acknowledge the “fluidity and complexity of people’s sense making strategies” (Lafrance et al., in press, p. 10) and to critically reflect on the ways in which participants both reproduced and resisted dominant dialogues in order to trouble and construct their own accounts.

One limitation of this study is that the analysis must be interpreted in the context in which the accounts were produced. That is, participants were mostly well-educated, cis-gendered women residing in an urban Canadian context. While participants were relatively diverse in terms of sexual orientation and ethno-cultural background, the voices of transgender women, older women, and women who have only had sex with women are omitted from this study. Future studies should expand recruitment and explore the experiences of other groups of women (e.g., transgender women, older women). Additionally, participants were exposed to the

interview questions for the first time during the in-person interview with the researcher.

Providing participants with interview questions in advance may yield responses that allow for deeper reflection and may provide more space for participant's unique insights.

Over a decade ago, Nicola Gavey (2005) published the seminal book *Just sex?: The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. It appears as if language has not shifted since then but rather has mutated in a way that continues to obscure unequal power relations under (not so subtle) discourses of female empowerment and agency. It is important to highlight here that this not to suggest that women are cultural dopes, but rather that socio-cultural power structures provide difficult terrain to navigate. When we silence discourses of unwanted or 'bad' sex for fear of drawing ominous conclusions about one's partner, the patriarchy forcibly silences experiences that are at risk of disrupting hegemonic masculinity. The problem here is that we are treating this as an individualized problem—one that requires direct attention *within* a relationship and can be resolved by a woman's expressions of desire. This emerges when participants either disclaim against the interpretation that their partner is a "bad guy" or place blame on themselves as they should have known he was a bad guy, assuming responsibility for deciding to be with him. In reality, this often has little to do with individual characteristics—this is a societal problem embedded in neoliberal ideals of individualism and a postfeminist mantra. When a cultural problem is treated as an individual one, implicit societal pressures are repackaged as individual choice/responsibility and the significant social structures requiring a collective acknowledgement and ultimately deconstruction are rendered further invisible. This is a complex task, however, requiring a challenge to the forms of subjectivities that are demanded by existing social and political structures (Weedon, 1987). We need to step outside the framework of legality (when thinking about consent and desire for example) and equally acknowledge and embrace the

discomfort of speaking outside of categories. As Butler (1990) contends, while contesting and re-imagining alternative subjectivities is possible, we must consider the rules regulating subjectivities (that are structured along matrices of gender and compulsory heterosexuality) as means to “enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility” (p. 145). Continued inquiry and dialogue is crucial to afford spaces for attempts at meaning making that are detached from dominant discourses (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). It is essential that we resituate the personal back in the collective political and concern ourselves with “reconnecting popular understandings of sex with issues of power, gender and sociocultural norms” (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012, p. 830). We must listen beyond dominant accounts that are constrained by material borders in order to hear discursive resistance and to transcend these borders, to bear witness to experience, to hear attempts at meaning making despite the inadequacy of available social vocabularies.



## Appendix A

Table I. Participant Demographic Information at the Time of the Interview

<b>ID</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnocultural Background</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>
1	26	Austrian-Polish-Canadian	Queer	In an open relationship (11 months)
2	29	French-English-Scottish	Straight, bi-comfortable	Married
3	25	Polish-Canadian	Straight, open to same sex relationship	In a relationship (4 years)
4	23	Dutch-Canadian	Queer	Single
5	35	Caucasian	Bisexual	In a relationship (15 years)
6	18	Mexican	Pansexual	In a relationship (7 months)
7	26	Canadian	Straight	Married
8	20	Italian-Chinese-Japanese	Straight	In a relationship (4 years)
9	26	Italian-Canadian	Straight	In a relationship (2.5 years)
10	20	Caucasian	Bisexual	Single
11	19	Caucasian	Bisexual	In a relationship (2 years)
12	31	Chinese-Canadian	Straight	In a relationship (1 month)
13	24	Russian-Canadian	Straight	In a relationship (2 years)
14	30	Portuguese-Canadian	Straight	Single
15	18	Jamaican	Bisexual	In a relationship (2 months)
16	18	West Indian	Straight	In a relationship (Several weeks)
17	18	Greek	Straight	In a relationship (1 year)
18	18	Canadian	Straight	In a relationship (3 months)
19	18	Ukrainian	Straight	Single
20	22	El Salvadorian-Canadian	Straight	In a relationship (1 year)

21	19	Chinese-Muslim	Straight	In a relationship (1.5 years)
22	19	Israeli-South African-Canadian	Straight	In a relationship (1.5 years)
23	18	Middle Eastern-Canadian	Straight	Single
24	18	Caucasian	Straight	Single

## Appendix B

### The Interview Schedule

#### Demographics:

- How old are you?
- What is your native language?
- What is your cultural background?
- Were you born in Canada?
  - If not: where were you born and how long have you lived in Canada?
- How would you describe your sexual orientation?
- Are you currently in a relationship?
  - If yes: With whom? How long has the relationship lasted?
  - If not: Can you please describe your most recent relationship.

#### What is sex?

- What does it mean to be 'sexually active'?
- When you have sex, how do you do it? What do you do? What do you say?
- What is the typical progression of sex? What activities typically happen first? When does sex end?
- What 'counts' as sex? Why?
  - Follow-up questions: How do you know when you've had sex? Would you consider oral sex as sex? What about touching? Anal sex?
- When you think about the people you have had sex with, which experiences do you include?
- What are other ways of having sex that you can imagine? (What are other ways of being sexual?)
  - Follow up: Who did you experience that with? Why does that feel sexual? How is that different from other sexual activities?
- What do you do when you want sex differently? What can you imagine doing?

#### What is good/bad sex?

- What is it about sex that feels good for you?
- What makes for good sex?
- Can you tell me about the best sex you've ever had?
- Some people think that orgasm is central to good sex. Do you think this is true? Is it necessary to have an orgasm to have good sex?
  - Follow up: Whose orgasm is important (i.e., male or female)?
- What do you consider to be bad sex? What makes sex bad for you?
- What do you do when you don't enjoy sex?
- Can you tell me about an experience of bad sex? What happened? Who was it with?

### Negotiating consent and desire

- How do you communicate that you want to have sex with a sexual partner?
- How do you initiate sex?
  - Follow-up: Who initiates? How does this happen? What do you say? What do you do?
- When do you agree that you want to have sex with your partner?
  - Follow up: Do you agree to each new sexual activity or is it assumed? For example, if you and your partner agreed to have oral sex, would you then check in with each other before having intercourse?
- Do you talk about what you like or don't like with your sexual partner?
- How do you communicate that you do not want to have sex?
  - Follow up: What do you say? What do you do?
- Do you feel comfortable refusing sex that is unpleasurable, unenjoyable, or undesirable?
- Can you tell me about a time that you have agreed to sex that you did not want to have? What happened?
- What does consent mean to you? How would you define consent?
- Do you communicate consent with your sexual partner? How?
  - Follow-up: Is this verbal? Or physical?
- Do you talk about your sexual experiences with your friends? What kinds of information do you share? What kinds of information don't you share? Why?

### Wrap Up:

- Do you think there is anything else I should know about your sexual experiences?
- Is there anything else you want to add that was not discussed today?

## Appendix C

### Transcript Notation

- . , ? ! Punctuation marks are used to mark speech rather than grammar. A period indicates a stopping fall in tone; a comma indicates a continuing intonation; a question mark indicates a rising inflection; an exclamation point indicates an animated or emphatic tone.
- word* Italics are used to indicate speech of the interviewer
- [ ] Square brackets mark overlap between utterances; also used to enclose deleted words
- = An equal sign at the end of a speaker's utterance and at the start of the next utterance indicate the absence of a discernible gap
- ... Three periods indicate a discernible pause. More periods prolong the pause
- A dash shows a sharp cutoff of speech
- : A colon indicates an extension of the sound or syllable it follows. More colons prolong the stretch
- Underlining indicates that words are uttered with added emphasis
- .hhh Indicates an audible in-breath
- hhh. Indicates an audible out-breath
- (( )) Double round brackets enclose the transcriber's description of non-speech sounds or other features of the talk or scene
- < > Encloses speech that is said noticeably slower than surrounding talk
- > < Encloses speech that is said noticeably faster than surrounding talk
- (hh) Inserted within words to indicate laughter
- (*word*) Indicates transcriptions which the transcriber is unsure if heard correctly

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