

Young Women, Desire and Heteronormativity:
The Relationship between Sexual Experience and the Sexual Double
Standard

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree in any university or another educational institution and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

I further declare that the ethical principles and procedures specified in Swinburne University of Technology's document on human research and experimentation have been adhered to in the preparation of this report. Approval for this project was granted by Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 2009/090).

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Abstract

A heteronormative discourse often assumes that men want sex and women want love (Bryant & Schofield 2007). It assumes gender structures sexuality in distinctly masculine and feminine ways and appropriate behaviours are defined according to these gender structures. This discourse fails to acknowledge the complexities of contemporary sexualities and positions women as passive and men as active which eliminates the need for negotiation in sexual relationships. Through analysis of in-depth interviews with women aged 22-31, this study sought to identify young women's perceptions of how accumulated sexual experience mediates the sexual double standard and to what extent they believe it influences their sexual relationships. It also explored women's subjective experiences of sexual agency, sexual pleasure and sexual desire. There is very little Australian sociological research that explores the accumulation of sexual experiences for women beyond school age and this thesis addressed this gap in the literature.

Above all, this research will argue that the participants' experiences of sex and sexuality are complex and contradictory. The results suggest that, for the women in this study, accumulated sexual experience influences young women's subjective experience of sexual agency, desire and pleasure. It will also argue that women face many challenges in expressing their agency desire and pleasure within the dominant discourse of heteronormativity.

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Interview Transcript Notation

Throughout this thesis, the participant's voices have been quoted directly from the interview. The following serves as a guide to reading the interview excerpts.

- ... Missing words (left out for flow of quote)
- () Participant information, such as ages and relationship status

Introduction

Sex and sexuality in contemporary Western society are as much social phenomena as they are individual and private affairs (Hawkes & Scott 2005). In recent years, young men and women have been the targets of an explosion of sexual material in contemporary Western media (Jackson & Cram 2003). Popular magazines discuss a variety of sexual issues such as how to 'give great head', 'seven ways to amaze her in bed' and 'multiple orgasms made easy' (Richters & Rissel 2005, p.ix). This is in contrast to sex education programs and other media commentaries that often frame sex and sexuality as a problem for young people and tend to focus on risk factors associated with sex like pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STI's), coercion and violence (Allen 2003). This negative focus neglects the positive effects a healthy sexual relationship can have for young people (Lindsay & Dempsey 2009) and restricts open discussions about sex and desire as they are still considered to be socially problematic (Hawkes & Scott 2005).

My focus in this thesis is young women's experiences of sexuality. The general aim of this thesis is to explore the ways in which young women talk about and experience their sexual lives given sex is something women are not supposed to talk about. Women as a group have been defined in the literature as lacking power and agency in their sexual relations with men thus they are the focus of this study.

The Pure Relationship, Heteronormativity and the Sexual Double Standard

Sexuality is a complex social category in which heterosexuality is posited as the norm (Weeks 1985). Young women, in particular, face many challenges in recognising and responding to their bodily desires within this social construction as different standards of acceptable behaviour for men and women still exist (Crawford & Popp 2003). On the one hand, there is a perception in popular culture that 'sexual freedom' from traditional models of heterosexuality has been achieved (Gill 2008). On the other hand, most research shows that there are different perceptions about appropriate behaviour for men and women (Crawford & Popp 2003). In this view, the problem in actualising this freedom lies with reconstructing attitudes towards sex, romance and intimacy in the face of heteronormative attitudes.

Some theorists suggest that late modern intimate relationships are being actively constructed as equal and previously defined boundaries and content (such as determined by gender norms) are increasingly rejected (Giddens 1992; Seymour & Bagguley 1999). A now classic example of this is Giddens' concept of the 'pure relationship'. He argues that the pure relationship is one that is based on sexual and emotional equality. It is a relationship that is 'entered into for its own sake' and is sustained only if mutual satisfaction is continued (1992, p.58). This type

of relationship is open to experimentation and negotiation and is more reliant on trust and democracy than traditional heterosexual relationships.

However, critics of the pure relationship argue that it is an idealised concept that has diverted focus from the persistent inequalities in material and structural conditions that contribute to persistence of gendered power relations (Seymour & Bagguley 1999).

In contrast to the notion of the pure relationship, others argue that contemporary sexual relations between young men and women continue to be defined by heteronormativity. Heteronormativity assumes that gender structures the experience of sexuality in distinctively masculine and feminine ways. Heterosexuality is posited as the norm in such a way that it requires no social or biological explanation. In other words, heteronormativity organises sexuality with an invisible hand that closes off the need for discussion or revision (Hawkes & Scott 2005).

Heteronormative relationships are deeply embedded in social and political structures that dichotomise masculinity and femininity (Allen 2003; Weeks 1985). Appropriate behaviour is defined according to gender structures which suggest that male heterosexuality is to be expressed in an active and unstoppable fashion in order to enhance masculinity whereas female sexuality should be repressed and passive and functions to keep a lid on men's purported 'natural' needs and desires (Allen 2003). The heteronormative framework assumes male sexuality is biologically derived with men persistently desiring and initiating sex (Hird & Jackson 2001; Stewart 1999). Female sexuality, on

the other hand, is dichotomously morally good or bad, that is, women can be 'good' and search for love or they can 'bad' and seek out sex.

Although this view is simplistic and does not wholly determine practices, the heteronormative discourse often assumes that women either want sex or love (Bryant & Schofield 2007; Gilmartin 2006).

One of the effects of heteronormativity is that young women receive contradictory messages about how to express their sexuality. For example, with the rise of sexually explicit texts in the media, young women are expected to appear sexy without actually 'being sexual', that is, women are expected to be sexually inexperienced while simultaneously showing sexual expertise (Levy 2006). These expressions tend to be directed at pleasing men rather than satisfying their own desires (Levy 2006; Lindsay & Dempsey 2009). According to Harris and colleagues (2000) these normative constructions of sexuality are inscribed during adolescence and despite research suggesting adolescence is a period characterised by changes in body, attitudes and behaviours, the heteronormative assumptions of sexuality persist. Women are expected to silence their own needs and wants to avoid violating feminine norms (Harris et al. 2000). Harris and colleagues maintain that the ability to manage an intimate relationship within a discourse of heteronormativity is privileged over independence and sexual choices for women are restricted by the rules of femininity.

Therefore, although young women may be attempting to negotiate their sexual relationships and are being encouraged to express

freedom and independence in their sexual choices, they are likely to be doing so within the confines of heteronormativity. This has the capacity to compromise and undermine their independence and agency (Harris et al. 2000) and places limits on acceptable sexual practices for women (Bryant & Schofield 2007). In addition, this sexual double standard fails to acknowledge the complexities of contemporary sexualities and positions women as passive and men as active which eliminates the need for negotiation in sexual relationships (Allen 2003). Exploration of young women's sexual agency and sexual subjectivities is important to contribute to our understanding of how heteronormative discourses and the sexual double standard continue to be influential.

Sexual Agency and Subjectivity

Sexual agency can be defined as the extent to which women are active subjects in their sexual relationships. It is the capacity to evaluate and make choices for oneself as a sexual being as well as possessing the power to carry out these actions. Averett et al. (2008) argue for a discourse of sexual agency to be promoted in research and our culture. The authors suggest that increasing empowerment through sexual agency could minimise sexual risks such as sexual coercion, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections and has the potential to reduce patriarchal controls.

Research to date has paid little attention to investigating young women's sexual agency and even less attention to investigating their perceptions of sexual agency (Overlien 2003). Policy makers and researchers often talk about sexual agency without knowing what they are discussing or specifically mentioning the term (Averett et al. 2008, p.332). Research studies to date indicate that sexual agency takes many forms and includes initiative taking, awareness of desire, and the individual's confidence and freedom to express sexuality in behaviours (Averett et al. 2008, p.332). The subject's capacity for self-reflection is also a component of agency as it opens up a number of courses of action and makes young women agents in their own lives (Overlien 2003). By encouraging young people to engage in a practice of self-reflection, their capacity to 'choose' a different mode of sexual practice based on mutual, reciprocal and consensual sex may be enhanced (Powell 2008).

According to Averett and colleagues (2008) agency incorporates a level of cognition and reflection. Saying no when it does not reflect a woman's best interest or is not a true reflection of her desires or her potential pleasures is an example of showing sexual agency. It is the motives and thinking that leads to choices, such as the choice to abstain, that determine if the individual has agency in the decision (Averett et al. 2008). Sexual agency is a process that is subject to changes and develops over time with various experiences. As such it can be understood in specific historical and cultural contexts (Overlien 2003).

The post-structuralist concept of subjectivity is also useful in highlighting the complexity and contradictory nature of sexual selves. It has a heritage in Foucauldian thought in that it views sexual subjectivities as regulated and established through discourse. A discursively constructed sexual self is understood as being constituted by a series of shifting and insecure subject positions. Allen argues that a subject position is not a cognitive choice but ‘a complex process of becoming that involves being subject/ed *to* and subject *of* discourse (2003, p.216). A subject position is a certain way of seeing the world and certain ways of being in the world that has implications for subjectivity and experience (2003, p.216). These are constituted by normative discourse (Bryant & Schofield 2007), and while the process involved is dynamic and unstable, it renders largely impossible a unified subject capable of resisting normative inscriptions and repetitive societal instructions on how one ‘should’ behave (Bryant & Schofield 2007).

The gendered and sexual categories we come to enact are historically produced from our varied positions in society with ‘deep roots in the social and economic order’ (Jackson 1999, p.24). Subjectivity is a product of individual, socially located biographies in which the present shapes memories and understandings of the past. Subjectivity comes into being through dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity (Bryant & Schofield 2007). However, it is important to note that young people’s sexual subjectivities do not always neatly conform to traditional notions of passive female and active male heterosexuality as

young people's constitution of their sexual subjectivities is context bound (Allen 2003). Allen speculates that social location and immediate circumstances (such as a research setting compared to a chat with friends) may produce different sexual subjectivities depending on the space available for young women to construct their sexual selves and 'take up' the various subject positions available to them.

The Research Focus

Most of the research on young women's sexuality to date is written from a feminist perspective which offers significant contributions to our understanding of the sources of oppression that exist in society for women. This thesis is also written from a broadly feminist perspective in that it assumes that sexuality is socially constructed and gendered power relations play a role in the construction and practice of heterosexual sex (Holland et al. 1992). In addition, it assumes inequalities in sexual relations are perceived as having an inherently negative influence on young women. Encouraging equal power, pleasure and agency in intimate relationships may serve to reduce the influence of the prevailing discourse of heteronormativity and the sexual double standard. The effect of equality is assumed to be positive by enhancing choices for women.

This study seeks to identify young women's perceptions of how accumulated sexual experience mediates the sexual double standard and

to what extent they believe it influences their sexual relationships. It also explores women's subjective experiences of sexual agency, sexual pleasure and sexual desire. Exploring the effect of accumulated sexual experience on sexual agency may contribute to our understanding of how the sexual double standard influences sexual subjectivities. This knowledge is imperative to assist women in obtaining equal status with men in sexual relationships.

Importantly, this study aims to give voice to women who are not teenagers and not adolescents. The women in this study are from a cohort that is so often ignored in sexuality research. They are working aged women who are still considered young but have life experiences beyond school and university. There is very little Australian sociological research that explores the accumulation of sexual experiences of this cohort of young women. This thesis will argue that accumulated sexual experience influences young women's subjective experience of sexual agency, desire and pleasure. It will also argue that women face complex and contradictory challenges in expressing their agency desire and pleasure within the dominant discourse of heteronormativity.

Chapter Outline

1. A Review of the Literature

Chapter one extends on ideas discussed above and aims to provide further examples of the importance of sexuality research, particularly for young women. It will explore the dominant discourse of heteronormativity and evaluate its influence on sexual desire and experience in the research to date. It will also highlight the links established in research to date between sexual experience, sexual agency and sexual pleasure and the possibilities that exist for young women to resist the dominant discourse.

2. Methodology and Method

This chapter provides information on the value of the research method chosen to study sensitive topics such as sex and sexuality. The qualitative research process is outlined and a detailed description of the interviews, the interviewees, the recruitment strategies and the process of analysis is provided. Specific interest in this chapter is on the importance of building trust and rapport with the participants and how this was achieved, as it was a crucial aspect of the research design.

3. Desire...A Missing Discourse?

This chapter will explore the relationship between sexual desire, sexual experience and sexual agency. In particular, it will consider awareness of desire and the capacity to speak of and act on desire (including masturbation) within the dominant discourse of

heteronormativity. On the one hand, it will discuss my interviewee's experiences of empowerment and entitlement to sexual desire through acknowledgement of their desires and having available spaces to speak of these desires. On the other hand, a discussion of the contradictions voiced when the women were presented with opportunities to act on their desires will demonstrate that sexual experience seems to mediate their notion of acceptable practices.

4. *From First Sex to Embodiment*

Chapter Four considers the effect of sexual experience and reflexivity on the young women's sexual subjectivities. By exploring the women's different experiences in sexual relationships, from first sex to increasing sexual embodiment in subsequent encounters/relationships, this chapter argues these women's sexual experiences are improving as, with experience and increased knowledge, spaces are created for women to discuss various aspects of sex.

5. *Persistence and Resistance to the Sexual Double Standard*

This chapter explores the influence of the sexual double standard on young women's sexual subjectivities. It pays specific attention to the conscious level at which women speak. Also it looks at the less conscious or implicit language they use to describe sexual attitudes and behaviours, such as how many sexual partners is viewed as

acceptable and how important are reputations and judgement. Sexual experience is argued to be a crucial factor in the negotiation of sexual practices. This chapter concludes with a brief case study on the effects of an alternate subject position such as masculine sexuality and argues that such a position may not be sufficient to resist the dominant discourses.

Chapter One: A Review of the Literature

In this chapter I discuss the studies conducted to date on young people's sexual experience and sexual behaviours. This chapter will attempt to highlight the complexities of young heterosexual women's sexuality and the contradictions they face in contemporary society. For example, although women are being encouraged to express freedom and independence in their sexual choices, it remains that these choices are structured by the norm of heterosexuality and constrained by the rules of femininity (Harris et al. 2000). Dominant discourses of sexuality suggest women should remain silent about their sexualities and sexual desires (Tolman 1994). This is in stark contrast to media representations of women which often advocate promiscuity and sexual freedom (Gill 2008; Harris et al. 2000; Levy 2006).

This chapter will begin by discussing young women's experience of desire, notably the work of Debra Tolman (1994) who suggests there is a missing discourse of desire for young women. It will stress the importance of recognising desire for young women to develop a sense of empowerment in their sexual relationships. I then turn to a body of literature which argues that for young women talking about sex and sexuality within a discourse of heteronormativity may be viewed as problematic. By not talking about sex young women's sexual agency and

ability to make informed choices may be restricted. Finally, this chapter will consider the potential for resistance to the dominant discourse of heteronormativity. Some research has suggested that being critical of heteronormativity and engaging in a process of self-reflection young women may increase the possibility of resistance and work towards equality in their sexual relationships.

Desire and Resistance

Some researchers have argued that there is a missing discourse of the ‘bodily experience of desire’ for young women with sexuality being constructed as a cognitive process rather than a bodily experience (Jackson & Cram 2003). Tolman (1994) conducted an empirical study of adolescent girls’ experiences of sexual desire and found that all of the participants expressed conflict when describing responses to sexual feelings. The role of women’s desire was denied in the responses as the girls’ narratives described ‘keeping their desire under wraps’ to protect themselves from such feelings. Young women are taught that sex carries with it many risk factors such as unwanted pregnancy, sexual transmitted infections and a negative reputation. Therefore, these sexual feelings may be viewed by the individual as problematic in relational and social lives. For example, girls who ‘lose control’ over desire and engage in sexual activity can be called ‘sluts’ and ostracised due to a negative reputation.

These results suggest by denying subjective experiences of desire or sexual feelings the bodily experience of desire may be suppressed. Tolman suggests that patriarchal society silences and obscures women's experiences and for women to be able to identify and respond to their sexual feelings and desires it is crucial to know the sources of oppression that operate in society.

Inspired by Tolman's work, Gilmartin (2006) conducted a longitudinal study in the United States of college women's sexual attitudes, practices and beliefs to explore qualitative shifts in orientation to sexual intimacy over a one year period. She found that in the initial study the participants associated sex with love and relationships, but not desire. By the second year in college the young women were 'having more fun' with sexual relationships and described more sexual desire and sexual activity as a result of being more experienced, confident and comfortable. However, Gilmartin argues that the new found freedom in sexual relationships was a 'misnomer'. The students may have readjusted their beliefs in order to fit in to the new peer environment which encouraged sexual permissiveness while maintaining patriarchal gender relations. Men were excused of committing to romantic relationships with the women they had sexual relationships with as, by engaging in the act of sex, the women were not complying with strict codes of feminine conduct.

It is important to acknowledge that young women do experience bodily desire for women to gain a sense of empowerment and agency in

their sexual relationships (Jackson & Cram 2003; Tolman 1994). Not knowing desire puts women at risk of remaining passive in their sexual relationships and potentially limiting the joy that may come from an active, reciprocal sexual experience (Braun et al. 2003).

Discussions about Sex, Agency and Subjectivity

Although heteronormativity makes it difficult for young women to talk about sex or sexuality, research shows that providing space for young women to discuss issues of sex and their sexual selves can be a source of empowerment and sexual agency for them (Averett et al. 2008). Thompson's (1990) work with teenage girls adds support to this. In the late 1970's and 1980's she conducted around 400 in-depth interviews in the United States. The topics addressed included sexual initiation, family and sexual histories, curiosity, desire and pleasure. About 75 per cent of the young women had had either heterosexual intercourse or extensive lesbian experience. Drawing on a sub sample of the 'sexually initiated' girls Thompson (1990) found that only a minority of young women were taking sexual initiative, satisfying their curiosity and initiating petting and coital relationships. She referred to these participants as pleasure narrators and, although they were a minority in the study, their narratives showed that through open discussions about sex, desire and pleasure with parents and peers women can learn and acknowledge their own desire

and pleasure, and gain insights into the body and intimate relationships. Knowledge of pleasure prepares and empowers young women and enables them to be more confident in sexual initiation (Thompson 1990) and which may contribute to development of greater sexual agency.

In another study analysing communication about sex between parents and their daughters, Averett and colleagues (2008) found parents talk very little about sex with their daughters and if they did it was on very limited topics usually surrounding the health risks associated with sex such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. The most prominent message from parents was to avoid being viewed as a slut. This message reinforced feminine passivity and rejected notions of sexual agency. Embodiment of gendered norms and beliefs about what women 'should' do in order to be appropriately feminine may result in 'choices' that are not necessarily in the woman's best interest (Powell 2008). For example, a woman may engage in unwanted sex as she may feel it is 'inappropriate to refuse' (Powell 2008, p.169) as she may believe she has 'led him on' (Hird & Jackson 2001, p.33) by not stating explicitly what she wanted, or rather did not want. Empowerment through sexual agency is also having the confidence and freedom to say no with intent, insight and reflection. As the next section will discuss, having a critical awareness of sexual situations may also enhance empowerment and the potential for resistance to traditional femininity.

Critical Consciousness, Resistance and Empowerment

In exploring how young people show resistance to heteronormativity, Jackson and Cram (2003) analysed young New Zealand women's narratives about sex and their sexual relationships through focus groups and individual interviews. They found that young women positioned themselves as 'agentic and knowledgeable' but resistance to heteronormativity was fragile as competing discourses were only able to open small spaces for disruption of the dominant discourse of heteronormativity. For example, in discussions of negotiating sexual relationships with men the women referred to 'sex as play' which removes the individual from a heteronormative discourse and positions them in an alternative discourse of 'play'. The authors suggest this may increase the possibility of resistance to heteronormativity and open up new possibilities for a more egalitarian language about sex.

Similarly, in an Australian study on femininity, heterosexuality and safe sex, Stewart (1999) interviewed 20 women aged 17 to 18 years who participated in a larger quantitative study that centred on hegemonic heterosexuality. The participants were selected on the basis of two criteria. Firstly, that they were sexually experienced, which she defined as having sexual intercourse with two or more partners. Secondly, that the participant's ideologies were in line with hegemonic heterosexuality which was identified through the results from the quantitative analysis. Stewart (1999) argues that women are more likely to resist traditional

femininity when they are critical of it and draws on a notion of 'critical consciousness' which may disentangle women from the confines of heteronormativity. Some women resisted heteronormative femininity by using their 'critical consciousness' to evaluate and negotiate sexual relationships. This allowed them to transition from relative powerlessness to positions which they were able to move away from passivity and exercise control and direction. So although these women initially showed beliefs in line with the dominant discourse of heteronormativity, they were still able to resist by being critical of it. It is important to note, however, that these women were still a minority.

According to Giddens (1992), sexual emancipation and sexual pleasure for women is facilitated by 'plastic sexuality' which is a sexuality that is decentred from gender roles and bound up with the self. Plastic sexuality is autonomous, freed from the needs of reproduction and the importance of the male sexual experience. He argues through mutuality in sexual relations, rather than unequal power, the art of giving and receiving pleasure can be achieved.

However, studies have shown that women who are active, pleasure seeking and autonomous may be viewed as 'acting like a man' (Allen 2003) or having a kind of 'masculine sexuality' (Bryant & Schofield 2007, p.327). Informal regulation of sexuality such as these customs and mores may serve to induce guilt or fear in young women (Hawkes & Scott 2005). Bryant and Schofield argued that when young women reject passive femininity and adopt an active approach to sexual

practice, which the authors argue is stereotypically masculine, young women often report feelings of guilt, self-loathing and self-doubt that they associated with 'being a slut' (2007, p.329). This suggests that the implicit egalitarianism that is celebrated by plastic sexuality is not yet a reality as individuals are ultimately bound up in social relations structured by gendered inequalities

Bryant and Schofield (2007) argue that by transforming sex to the physical and away from the psychic new erotic possibilities exist thus increasing the potential for desire and pleasure (2007, p.334). The authors argue the body is central to understanding the way that the subject takes agency. Agency, as argued above, may not be reducible to the embodied performance of sex. It is the operationalisation of bodily experiences within discursive formations that enables understanding of sexual experience, that is, to make sense of sexual subjectivities women draw on prevailing [hetero]sexual discourse and actively self-reflect on sexual practices.

Their study identified 'transformative moments' where some of the women were able to 'discover' the capacity to take agency and experience desire to improve sexual experiences (Bryant & Schofield 2007, p.331). By being active in attending and responding to the body women may experience 'pleasurable sexual embodiment' which can assist her in taking an active role in sexual relationships (Bryant & Schofield 2007, p.334). This study suggests that sexual experiences may

assist women in the development of sexual agency and which has the potential to increase pleasure.

Research Question and Objectives

The research discussed above shows that young women face many challenges in talking about and expressing their sexuality. The discourse of heteronormativity constricts the space available for alternative discourses which places limits on empowerment and entitlement to sex for young women. However, by being critical of the dominant discourse and engaging in practices that encourage mutuality and reflection there is possibilities for resistance. By reflecting on bodily experiences and talking about sex young women may learn to know and understand their sexual lives.

All of the literature discussed in this chapter focuses on teenagers and adolescents. The social environment that these young women interact in is significantly different beyond school or college years in that these years are characterised by immediate peer group pressures and new experiences. There is dearth of literature that addresses the experiences of older 'young' women in Australia who may have more diverse life experiences outside of the school environment. In order to evaluate the persistence of the dominant discourse in relation to women's sexual subjectivities and their sexual agency, desire and pleasure it is crucial to

explore the effect of accumulated sexual experience for this cohort of women.

By exploring the ways in which young women talk about their sexual lives this study sought to identify young women's perceptions of how accumulated sexual experience mediates the sexual double standard and to what extent they believe it influences their sexual relationships and their subjective experience of sexual agency, desire and pleasure. The specific research question is: How do young heterosexual women perceive the relationship between the accumulation of sexual experience and their sense of sexual agency, sexual desire and sexual pleasure?

The next chapter will discuss the research process and key methodological issues that were addressed throughout the project.

Chapter Two: Methodology and Method

Stein argues that qualitative methods have the capacity to forge connections between sexuality and the self and because they allow the researcher to get 'closer' to the participant's stories (1997, p.203). This is particularly important for sex and sexuality research as it allows women to describe how their own bodies tell a story of desire and pleasure and allows participants to convey the meanings they make of their experiences. This chapter will discuss the methodology and method used in this study and will provide a detailed description of the research strategy. It will highlight some of the issues in conducting sex and sexuality research and how these issues were dealt with. It will begin with an overview of interpretive social science and qualitative research methods and the rationale for selecting a qualitative approach. It will then discuss how the interviews were conducted, the main themes that were discussed and the importance of building trust and rapport with the participants. Finally, the approach to the data analysis is discussed, concluding with a description of the sample that was obtained, the recruitment strategies utilised and finally some ethical considerations.

Qualitative Research Methods and Interpretive Social Science

This study used the tools of interpretive social science to establish how people construct meaning and understand their social and, more specifically, their sexual worlds (Neuman 2006). Social interactions create systems of meaning which are constantly evolving. Individual motives for such interactions must be considered as it is the resulting action, thoughts or behaviours that stem from these motives that is subject to analysis. Qualitative research seeks to interpret and understand meaning individuals give to their behaviour (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). For behaviour to be interpreted and be of interest to the researcher the actor must attach meaning to the action, thus it is the subjective meaning of action in the shared social setting that is the focus of analysis (Neuman 2006). The question to be asked is what do actions mean to the people who engage in them? Qualitative research methods allow participants to describe their subjective experiences and feelings. They are 'flexible and fluid' (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, p.204) and are therefore appropriate for studying sensitive topics such as sex and sexuality. Tolman and Szalacha argue that qualitative research methods in sexuality research:

...depart from a survey design by creating an opportunity for girls to put into words and to name their experience in and questions about a realm of their lives that remains unspoken

in the larger culture. Thus, as a form of data collection, it enables us to learn from girls what might otherwise remain an unknown perspective on this part of their lives (1999, p.13)

Quantitative research methods frame questions and limit answers about what is important in young women's sexual development (Tolman & Szalacha 1999). Whereas qualitative research is an approach that is 'driven by the desire to illuminate the questions under study...and to uncover multiple realities' (Kuzel 1992, p.32).

Qualitative research is consistent with the demands of interpretive social sciences. Interpretive social science focuses on meaningful social action and the social context in which the action occurred (Neuman 2006, p.88). This approach emphasises individual decision making processes and subjective feelings and seeks to explain other people's realities by 'revealing the meanings, values, interpretive schemes, and rules of living used by people in their daily lives' (Neuman 2006, p.91). As such, it is a method that does not strive to be representative of a larger population.

The interviews

The qualitative research method chosen for this study was in-depth interviews. In depth interviews provide a platform for participants to tell their stories in their own words and in a way that is meaningful to

them (Stein 1999) and provides the researcher with an insight into the participants intimate thoughts and associated behaviours that quantitative methods do not allow (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). Seven semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with young women who identified as sexually experienced. Sexual experience was a subjective definition that did not rely on the individual having had vaginal intercourse. It was conceptualised as having engaged in oral, anal or vaginal sex with a minimum of two sexual partners. It was expected that sexually experienced women will provide a rich data source (Stewart 1999) as their sexual histories may provide more extensive experiences which could illuminate incidents of sexual agency, desire and pleasure.

All of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours with one exception which lasted only 35 minutes. For this interview, the schedule was adjusted throughout the interview process as the respondent was visibly shaken and upset due to a recent relationship breakup. To limit the level of distress, only questions that would not relate back to her recent relationship were asked of her. I offered to terminate the interview but she was keen to persist which indicates I had built sufficient trust and rapport.

The interview Schedule

Previous research has suggested that careful choices must be made about what to and what not to ask so as to enhance the

development of trust as sex is a topic that women are traditionally not meant to discuss (Tolman & Szalacha 1999). Therefore, the interviews began with very general discussions about why the participant chose to be involved in the study and discussions about the most recent relationship, such as how did they meet and how long were they together for. These questions were initially designed to put the participant at ease and develop a conversational tone early. Interestingly, when asked about their most recent relationship most of the participants launched into detailed accounts of their sexual experiences with either their current or previous partners. This showed the women were open to discussing intimate details of their lives.

Following on from the introductory questions, three main themes were covered (see Appendix C). The women were first asked to discuss general attitudes towards sex, sexual pleasure and desire and their perceptions of appropriate sexual behaviours for men and women. This theme was designed to elicit feelings of entitlement and empowerment for the women in their sexual relationships in terms of pleasure and desire and to evaluate the influence of the sexual double standard at an individual level and at a societal level. Secondly, the women were asked about their sexual histories, sexual practices and significant sexual experiences. This section related directly to the research question. By asking about early sexual experiences in comparison to more recent ones it was possible to extract how different experiences influenced their sense of sexual desire, agency and pleasure. In terms of sexual agency, it was

particularly important to ask about sexual practices to gain a sense of their experience of empowerment in sexual relationships, for example, initiation of various practices and sexual preferences were discussed here to determine how their experiences influenced their sense of sexual agency. In addition, by asking about significant sexual experiences rather than positive or negative ones, I was able to explore, in their words, a descriptive narrative of various experiences, be they positive or negative. This allowed the participants to raise negative or traumatic experiences themselves when they felt comfortable doing so. This approach was considered to be less intrusive and less confrontational.

Finally, the participants were asked directly about agency and experience and asked to provide examples of what has changed or remained the same over their life as a sexually active woman and if they feel a sense of power and control in their sexual relationships. This section directly assessed the participant's perceptions of their agency and how their experiences may have altered their sense of sexual agency. Prior to commencement of each interview, the women were asked to provide some basic demographic information (see Appendix B for a copy of the Background Information Sheet) to contextualise their experiences in terms of educational attainment which is an indicator of socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity and religious beliefs.

Trust and Rapport

I conducted all of the interviews at a time and location that was appropriate for the participant. Two of the interviews were conducted in my home, one at the university and the remaining interviews were conducted in the home of the interviewee. Research has shown that contextual factors may influence young women's disclosure of active female sexuality and sexual pleasure, that is, they are more likely to disclose when they feel 'safe' to do so (Allen 2003). Thus, the choice to visit participant's homes was made to ensure the participants felt comfortable and safe in their surroundings.

Building trust and rapport with the participants was an essential part of this research. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic a considerable amount of time was spent on developing trust and rapport with the participants, for example, as discussed above, the interview schedule was designed to put the participant at ease and develop a conversational tone early. Throughout the interviews I stressed the value of the participant's contribution and my gratitude for their participation. Further, where appropriate I disclosed some of my own sexual experiences where I felt it would add to the conversation. This was done to enhance the participant's disclosure and to ensure they felt safe from judgement. As suggested by Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) showing a willingness to disclose my own experiences and respond to questions

when asked served to facilitate rapport and trust. However, the level of disclosure was closely monitored in terms of the context of the interview and caution was taken to avoid over disclosure.

The above steps were taken to develop a better understanding of the participant's situations (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). Further, previous research has shown that female sexual agency and sexual pleasure and desire are more likely to be disclosed in a safe environment where negative stigmas from peers are less likely (Allen 2003; Tolman 1994). In addition, allowing sufficient time for the women to divulge their sexual histories and to explore their thoughts facilitated the depth of data obtained. The women often needed to be brought back to the original question asked. Due to the complexities of sex and sexualities I allowed the women as long as they needed to get 'lost in thought' and the result was often a new and interesting story. Six out of the seven women interviewed commented that they had never thought about some of the topics discussed in the interview 'in that way' before or they had never voiced certain issues at all. This adds further support to the value of this study. In addition, it was thought this method would reveal the flux and contradictions of everyday subjective realities (Stein 1999). Providing a platform for women to discuss potentially stigmatised or taboo attitudes, beliefs and experiences to a non-judgemental listener in a forum that may not usually be available to them may enhance self-awareness and empowerment and can be therapeutic in itself (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). It is important to note that an interview is not a counselling

session and that in attempting to build trust and rapport, I was cautious not to cross over into the role of a counsellor when participants became distressed. This was challenging for me, particularly in interviews that involved disclosure of distressing sexual experiences, and on a couple of occasions I left interviews feeling mentally and emotionally drained from having to tread this fine line. I was able to offer the participants phone numbers for counselling services and I turned to my research supervisor to debrief.

Recruitment and the Sample

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, I did not advertise outside of my personal social networks. Through snowball sampling was able to ensure that I did not interview anyone known to me personally. I began by emailing my personal contacts then requested they forward the information about the study and an invitation to participate to their personal contacts. People were not asked to supply names and/or contact details of potential interviewees. Rather, the potential recruits were required to make the first contact.

Some argue that networking or snowball strategies may be beneficial for recruitment of participants for sensitive topics, however, these strategies may result in a homogenous sample (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). This was not the case for this sample. As discussed below,

this group had significantly different life experiences, occupations, religious beliefs and relationship statuses.

Heterosexual women aged between 22 and 31 years were interviewed. This age group was chosen as the majority of research conducted to date focuses on teenagers or young adolescents. The participants were all born in Australia or New Zealand and described themselves as Anglo Saxon. Two of the women were students (one full time and one part time) while the others were all in full time paid employment. All of the participants had completed undergraduate or post graduate university degrees and one participant described herself as religious and regularly attended church. Four of the women were single and three were either married, de facto or partnered and one participant had a child. In order to obtain a diverse range of experiences, a good mix of relationship circumstances was obtained. Research has shown that female sexual relationships may be viewed negatively outside the context of a stable romantic relationship, for example, sex for love is acceptable but sex for the sake of sex is not (Gilmartin 2006; Tolman 1994). Therefore, differences in relationship status were expected to influence the meaning of sexual experiences.

Although differences along the lines of social class and ethnicity were expected to contribute to sexual subjectivities and sexual experiences, to focus on these aspects would deny a thorough examination of the research question due to the limited scope of this

project. In addition, the sample obtained for this research was not ethnically diverse enough to warrant such an analysis.

Analysis

Thematic analysis is a flexible method for reporting and analysing patterns within the data, which provides a rich and detailed account of the information obtained (Braun & Clarke 2006). Rather than relying on a defined set of rules for analysis, the qualitative research approach relied on 'logic in practice' which is nonlinear and dependent on 'detailed examinations of cases that arise in the natural flow of social life' (Neuman 2006, p.151). The interviews transcripts were initially analysed within the interview narrative then across all interviews for comparison. Each transcript was read through to get an overall sense of the data then the common themes were extracted, coded and collapsed into major themes (Averett et al. 2008). These themes represented conceptual categories in line with current theoretical concepts informing the study in addition to the themes extracted from the responses of the participants.

The focus of the analysis was on how women interpret their lived experiences of their sexual lives in relation to the world around them (Plummer 1994), acknowledging the multilayered nature of sexual subjectivities. As the accounts of their sexual lives were retrospective we cannot be certain that the interviewees describe how they really felt at the

time. Stein argues ‘when people talk about their lives they actively frame their experience to suit their own needs, filtering their description of actual events and behaviours through narrative devices’ (1999, p.7). In keeping with this insight, the thematic analysis conducted sought to explore their version of reality but also worked to unravel the surface of reality by looking for inconsistencies and contradictions in the interview text. Further, the analysis presented also acknowledges that my voice as the researcher is inseparable from the interpretation of the narratives. Thus, the results represent my subjective understandings of the participant’s constructions of their sexual experiences and stories. In the analysis that follows, I present my interpretation of these young women’s stories as I have understood them and acknowledge that other interpretations may be possible.

Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality

All participants were required to sign consent forms prior to the commencement of the interview. Participants were informed that they were under no obligation to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To guard against issues of internal confidentiality, participants who were known to be known to each other were not invited to take part.

All information is being kept completely confidential and tapes and transcriptions are being stored in a locked desk in the researcher's home office for five years as per Swinburne Ethics Committee guidelines, then destroyed or wiped. Computer records are guarded with passwords known only to the researcher. Consent forms are being stored separately from data to further ensure confidentiality.

This project aims to provide insights into the factors influencing female sexual expression and practices as a means to highlight women's perceptions about the extent to which the sexual double standard persists in [hetero]sexual relationships. Therefore it was necessary to ask participants' questions about their general attitudes towards sex, their sexual histories, partners and practices, and to what extent they see themselves as agents in their sexual relationships and experiences. While it was to be expected that women volunteering for the study would be open to discussing these aspects of their private lives, there were times when participants may have felt unexpectedly vulnerable or distressed during interviews due to the disclosure of sexual disappointments or, more significantly, maltreatment in the past. For this reason, referral phone numbers to appropriate counselling services were provided in the information statement.

No risk to the researcher was anticipated, although there were times when debriefing with the supervisor or convenor was required due to the personal nature of the research topic. Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) suggest that debriefing is particularly important when sensitive or

emotionally charged issues are involved. Therefore, contact with the research supervisor was maintained at all times whilst in the field.

Participant Biographies in Brief

It is now time to introduce the participants as a preliminary to discussing their experiences in the chapters that follow. To ensure confidentiality is maintained, all participants were given pseudonyms, and other potentially identifying information (e.g. occupation, ages and name of sexual partners) have been altered.

Alice is a 29 year old professional with post graduate qualifications. She is well travelled and now lives and works in inner Melbourne. She is in a relatively new relationship with a man she has known for many years. She describes the relationship as serious and is says she is very happy and comfortable with him. She has had a number of other casual and long term intimate relationships including one in which she lived with her partner for a number of years.

Sophie is 22 and a full time student. She grew up in a religious family and is extremely committed to her Christian beliefs. She is engaged to her first romantic partner and is looking forward to her wedding night where she intends to have vaginal sex for the first time. She describes

herself as sexually experienced, having engaged in oral sex with her partner.

Olivia is 30 and single. She is tertiary educated and lives and works in inner Melbourne where she enjoys an active social life and a comfortable living. She has had three long term relationships and since the most recent breakup she has had a number of casual sexual relationships. Her most recent long term relationship ended badly and she admits it took her a while to 'get over it'.

Natalie is a 26 year old, single woman who has now been living in Melbourne for a number of years. She is tertiary educated and works in a demanding professional role in inner Melbourne. She describes herself as a 'relationship girl' who has had a number of long term relationships since her first sexual experience in her teenage years. Upon moving to Melbourne she began engaging in casual sex relationships for the first time.

Lucy is 30 and has been in a relationship for seven years. She grew up in a middle class family and is now a manager of business affairs. She lives with her partner and they had a child together three years ago. Since losing her virginity at age 15, she has had a number of casual partners throughout her teenage years and two other long term relationships.

Renee is 28 and recently single. She is studying part time and working in women's health full time. She intends to change careers upon completion of her studies. She has had a number of casual partners as well as long term relationships and has been sexually active since she was a teenager. Her most recent relationship ended badly.

Eve is 30 and single. Her early sexual experiences were abusive and distressing. She is currently celibate but has engaged in a number of casual and longer term sexual relationships when she was younger and has had one serious boyfriend.

The next chapter will discuss the experience of desire for these young women. This will be the first of three chapters discussing the results of the study.

Chapter 3: Desire...A Missing Discourse?

Empirical studies of female sexuality suggest sexual desire is a complicated and important experience for young women (Tolman 1994). Research has shown that within a discourse of heteronormativity women are not taught to acknowledge or recognise their own desires (Hird & Jackson 2001; Tolman 1994). Further, if women do recognise their own desires they are not supposed to act on them or speak about them as this violates traditional femininity (Allen 2003) and connotes promiscuity for women (Gilmartin 2006). Thus desires are often left unspoken for fear of negative repercussions such as being called a 'slut' (Hird & Jackson 2001).

This chapter sought to explore young women's perceptions of sexual desire and the influence of sexual experience on these desires. Further, it examined how these experiences influenced sexual agency. Through analysis of the participant's stories this chapter explores their awareness of sexual desire and how they speak of their desires. It will then address how these young women act on desires within their sexual relationships followed by an analysis of acting on desire in the absence of a partner, for example through masturbation. I will argue that for the women in this study acknowledging and speaking of sexual desire and being able to act on these desires encouraged entitlement to sex and empowerment in their sexual relationships. In addition, although there

were some contradictions in their stories, I will argue that sexual experience facilitates agency in terms of sexual desire.

Awareness of desire

Awareness and ownership of desire challenge heteronormativity and has the potential to increase pleasure (Stewart 1999). Stewart shows that by taking proactive stance with sex and/or relationships women resist traditional femininity. Many of the women in the present study recognised and spoke of their desires with a conscious awareness. For example, Olivia said:

Sexual desire is like massive for me. I feel that I have quite a high sex drive. Like, I don't understand couples who do not have sex. I just think it would be hell. Even that, I thought that might change when I had a partner, but no, no, no. If I am in a relationship with someone the sexual desire to get physical with them is quite high (30, single).

Regardless of her relationship status, Olivia experiences what she considers to be a high sex drive. Throughout the interview, Olivia repeatedly stresses that she is comfortable with her sexuality and her sexual history. She believes sexual desire is a 'natural thing':

I think it is quite natural, like I think people have instincts and urges...I sometimes go, I just picked up a man with no intention of seeing him again, just to have sex! I'm not ashamed of it...I'm like well I need to fill in the gaps between relationships.

Tolman (1994) argues that young women who trust their minds and bodies may experience a stronger sense of their sexual selves, entitlement and empowerment. She argues 'there is a symbolic interplay between desire and empowerment: to be empowered to desire one needs a critical perspective, and that critical perspective will be extended and sustained through knowing and experiencing the possibilities of desire and healthy embodied living' (1994, p.340). Olivia demonstrates that she is not only aware of her sexual desires but she is also empowered by them as she is comfortable in 'picking up' men just to have sex with them. In addition, she believes there is a justifiable need to 'fill in the gaps' between relationships. These quotes demonstrate that she is not only empowered by her desires but she is also has a critical perspective: she acknowledges her desires and justifies her behaviours. She clearly enjoys a sense of entitlement to sex.

Speaking of desire

Jackson (1999) argues the scripts that govern female sexuality deny active discussions of sexuality and desire even within the confines of a relationship thus openly speaking about or articulating desire is constrained. Alice says in previous relationships, particularly when she was younger, she was not confident in articulating her desires:

Certainly the last relationship I was in, which was a long term relationship, I don't think our sexual relationship needed to be worked on but I was younger and I don't think I was as confident to talk about it either. So that is certainly something that comes with experience as well and having multiple partners (29, partnered, not cohabiting).

Although Alice acknowledges she did not need to discuss her desires she also highlights she may not have been comfortable doing so, had the situation demanded it. Traditional discourses of female sexuality suggest that women should not express their desires but some research has argued that the confines of a relationship offers a 'safe haven' for women to be more expressive (Tolman 1994, p.330) as the risk of earning a negative reputation is lower. Even within the confines of a relationship, Alice believes initially she did not have the confidence to

express or discuss her desires. However, throughout the interview Alice stresses she is now happy to discuss her desires with her current partner as she is more confident and comfortable with her relationship and herself. Thus, her sexual experiences have facilitated her sexual agency, in that she now has the capacity to initiate discussions of her needs and wants in order to articulate her desires.

Acting on desire

According to Gilmartin, the ‘proper’ feminine code says women are not supposed to act on their desires, especially outside of a romantic relationship (2006, p.430). However, most of the women in this study acknowledged their erotic desires and were active participants in pursuing and fulfilling these desires, whether in the context of a longer term relationship or a casual affair. Responses showed that these women were not just passive recipients of male needs and wants but as a result of being confident and comfortable with their bodies and their sexuality they were able to take control of initiating sex and sexual practices. Olivia’s discussion of her sexuality and her sexual experiences suggested that she was at ease with having casual affairs or one night stands. She was comfortable and confident in expressing her desires. She discussed her ability to act on her desires and initiate sex with men in the context of a one night stand:

If I desire to go, you know what, I want to have sex with you
I will pretty much go out of my way to make sure it
happens!... it feels like I am in control because I...know what
I like and how to get it (30, single).

Further, Natalie had been in a number of long term relationships
throughout her teenage years and into her early twenties. When
discussing a previous relationship, she said:

I actually think I have been more sexual than my boyfriends.
[My ex boyfriend] used to say to me, you are the only girl
that has never said no. The only girl who is like come on!
You know what I mean? I am like that. I love having sex and
when I am in a relationship and it's on tap so to speak, I'm
like yeah why not? (26, single)

These examples demonstrate the participants' willingness to act on
their desires regardless of relationship status in violation of
heteronormative assumptions.

However, their narratives of their experiences were not without
contradictions. For example, Olivia described being an 'innocent
bystander' in the early stages of her most recent relationship. She
described wanting more than just a casual affair with her partner which

led her to ‘really think about sleeping with him’, despite having strong desires to do so. Therefore, when he took control of the relationship and the initiation of it, she retreated into the passive, traditionally feminine role and allowed him to chase her and be the active one in pursuing the relationship. As Tolman (1994) and others (Averett et al. 2008; Harris et al. 2000) argue, women’s desire has been seen conventionally as something that requires monitoring and in most cases silencing to avoid vulnerability or negative repercussions. Women are expected to hold back from sex, not from a lack of desire, but out of a fear of not being respected (Averett et al. 2008, p.341). Even women who embrace more celebratory discourses of their sexuality and desire may choose to silence their desires for the sake of the potential development of a relationship. For this participant, her sexual experiences and reported feelings of empowerment in casual sexual relationships did not provide a sufficient sense of entitlement to sex when faced with a potential relationship.

So the question begs, how is the experience of entitlement to sexual desire different for young women in the absence of a man? Do they still experience it and do they choose to act on it?

Acting on Desire Alone: Masturbation

Masturbation is known to be an almost universal activity, engaged in more frequently than any other sexual practice (Hawkes & Scott 2005,

p.4). However, studies have shown that women are less likely to masturbate than men and, if they do so, they begin at a later age than men (Richters & Rissel 2005). In the present study, masturbation proved to be a really important part of what the women wanted to talk about. It was not included in the original interview schedule but every participant introduced the topic without prompting. Discussions of masturbation further demonstrated that these women were not simply acting in accordance with heteronormative expectations but that they do experience desire, they take action to fulfil their desires and are happy to openly discuss these experiences. One participant discussed teaching herself to reach orgasm through her experiences with masturbation:

I had been in this relationship with this guy for 6 months and sometimes I could feel getting closer so I decided to learn how to orgasm basically, having read enough in women's magazines to know that was the recommended approach. And got into it! (Lucy, 30, partnered, cohabiting).

Bryant and Schofield argue that by being attentive to the body and responding to its needs women may experience 'pleasurable sexual embodiment' (2007, p.334) which can assist them in taking an active role in sexual relationships. This example shows that Lucy was able to recognise that she was 'getting closer' to orgasm with a partner but it was through her experiences with solitary masturbation that she learnt to how

to climax. By taking matters of desire into her own hands and exploring her body, she enhanced her capacity for pleasure. She now says she does not 'do sex without orgasm'. Thus acting on her desires and being responsive to her body has increased her pleasure.

These women's openness about their masturbation practices is in contrast to much of the literature in the area which suggests there is a missing discourse of the bodily experience of desire for women. These women clearly showed they not only had a language for the bodily experience of desire but they were happy to act on their desires and share these typically private experiences, in most cases, without prompting. Some ambivalence about masturbation was also revealed. When discussing her feelings about masturbation, one participant said:

This is probably completely normal but I always feel a little bit guilty after [masturbating]. Especially when I was doing it all the time... I still felt guilty afterwards (Eve, 30, single).

The language used in this quote indicates masturbation is a topic that Eve does not discuss with others or has limited knowledge of others' experiences. Thus the open discussions engaged in throughout these interviews may not be typical of her discussions with friends beyond the interview setting. It is important to note Eve had slept with fewer men than most of the other participants and had not been involved in an ongoing, romantic relationship for nine years. Her early sexual

experiences were abusive and distressing. When referring to her masturbation practices, she spoke of always experiencing feelings of guilt. It is possible that her early experiences with sexual abuse are associated with her feelings of guilt but this was not discussed by Eve and is therefore only speculation.

Interestingly, the other participants that reported feelings of guilt and shame about their masturbation practices were the ones with fewer sexual partners or more limited relationship experience. Sophie was the youngest participant and had had oral sex with one man but had not had vaginal or anal sex. She said:

So I started [masturbating] when I was about 12 or 13. Then I was like I don't think it's good to be doing this all the time. There were certainly times where I felt it was like every night or every time someone left the house...I did feel like it was a bit excessive (Sophie, 22, partnered, not cohabiting).

In contrast to these participants, all of the other women spoke of being quite happy to fulfil their needs and desires through masturbation. This suggests that for the women in this study sexual experience may influence perceptions of appropriate sexual behaviour, including masturbation. Although it is not possible to generalise to a wider population given the small sample size. The women with more sexual partners were quite happy to celebrate their sexuality while the

participants with fewer sexual partners had feelings of guilt or questioned the behaviour.

Conclusions

In support of previous literature (for example see Tolman 1994), this chapter has demonstrated that young women's perceptions and experiences of sexual desire are complex and often contradictory. Many of the women in this study spoke of their desires with a level of awareness that enhanced their empowerment and provided them with a sense of entitlement to sexual experiences. Through a critical consideration of sexual desire they were able to take a proactive stance towards sex and resist traditional femininity. In addition, sexual experience facilitated articulation of sexual desire which served to increase the participant's sexual agency regardless of relationship status. Contradictions in the women's narratives were most prominent when discussing acting on desires. A willingness to act violates heteronormative assumptions thus the contradictions voiced in women's experiences suggests the pervasiveness of heteronormative discourses may persist beyond adolescence. In terms of developing a relationship with a man, one woman, who was normally confident and comfortable in acknowledging, pursuing and acting on her sexual desires, chose to silence her desires for the sake of the relationship.

Acting on sexual desires in the absence of a partner served to enhance the participant's pleasure and was an important experience for all of the women in the study as evidenced in their open discussions of masturbation. However, for some of the participants having fewer sexual partners resulted in feelings of guilt and shame around masturbation practices which suggests experience with various partners may contribute to perceptions of appropriate sexual behaviour for these women.

For the participants in this study a discourse of desire was largely present. Following on from this, the next chapter will explore sexual behaviours and practices from first sex to a greater embodiment of sex to evaluate the effect of various experiences on the sexual subjectivities of these women and their experience of sexual agency.

Chapter 4: From First Sex to Embodiment

Attwood (2006) argues that in order to examine how sexual discourses, practices and values are changing there is a need to identify key shifts in the construction of sexual relations. For example, with the proliferation of sexual discourse in the mass media, research has shown that young women's experiences and stories are becoming less and less homogenous as some young women are beginning to show resistance to dominant discourses. This resistance manifests through expressions of agency in their sexual relationships and their sexual subjectivities, whilst other women are staying true to traditional femininity (Allen 2003; Jackson & Cram 2003; Tolman 1994). According to Harris and colleagues, young women today face a constant struggle in contemporary society to express their sexuality in socially acceptable ways as sexual relationships and practices remain difficult to negotiate for young people and as such are a site for both pleasure and danger. These difficulties are largely due to the complex and contradictory pressures on young people's intimate lives (Hawkes & Scott 2005).

Jackson argues that the specifics of everyday sexuality are not simply a matter of desire and identity, but include managing bodily practices and making sense of sexual situations (Jackson 1999, p.25). She

suggests it entails active learning from our interpretations of experiences and the cultural resources at hand to evaluate sexual encounters. For example, the prevailing discourses of sexuality establish parameters of acceptable sexual behaviours and attitudes and, as such, provide the cultural resources required in the making of sexual subjectivities (Bryant & Schofield 2007). However, young women's sexual subjectivities do not always neatly conform to traditional notions of discourse such as the passive female and active male (Allen 2003). Young women also draw on their experiences to make sense of their sexual situations in diverse ways.

This chapter will address the sexual subjectivities of young women by exploring the effect of experience and reflexivity on their embodied experiences. That is, how do young women perceive themselves as agents in their lived sexual experiences and to what extent do their sexual experiences influence their sexual behaviours and sexual agency? It will address these questions by exploring stories of first sexual encounters, flirting, casual sex and sex in a relationship. It will also explore stories of pleasure and embodiment for these young women. I will argue that by creating spaces for women to develop their knowledge on sex, sexual pleasure and safe sexual experiences may be enhanced. As their stories of more recent sexual experiences show, their pleasure has increased through experience and a process of reflexivity.

First Sex Stories

Research suggests that in early or first sexual encounters for young women, there is an absence of pleasure, agency and power (Hawkes & Scott 2005). For men, first sex is about establishing masculinity and ‘becoming a man’ (Holland et al. 2000, p.223). It more likely to be a source of pride than shame (Richters & Rissel 2005). Young men’s accounts of first sex are often more embodied than young women and show an agency that is notably absent from women’s accounts. For example, Holland and colleagues argue that for men first sex is about performance and gives them ‘something to talk about’ within their peer group, but for young women notions of pleasure, performance or achievement to adult status are not discussed (2000, p.224). First sex is a site where heteronorms appear most prominently. The man is the subject and the woman is the object (Holland et al. 2000).

In the early stages of engaging in sexual relationships, sex for some young women was a gift to give to their partners, something to enhance the relationship. For example, some of the women in the present study said when they first started having sex it was about making men like them more. Renee said:

I would probably have more sex with more people when I was younger, because I was young and I definitely had that

whole thing of, I have sex with him, he'll like me. Which is ridiculous (28, single).

In these early sexual relationships Renee was expressing a degree of agency by choosing to engage in sex with men but her actions were clouded by expectations of her partner's approval that she assumed would emerge through sex. These expectations could reaffirm her femininity as she was only engaging in sex for the purpose of enhancing the prospect of a relationship. Thus, she was conforming to traditional notions of femininity by seeking a relationship not sex.

In addition, in the following quotation Renee comments she did not receive any pleasure from these early encounters and there was a sense of coercion in her narrative of first sex. This indicated that she may not have had the knowledge or experience to make sense of sexual situations to improve them or to abstain from unwanted sex. She said about the loss of her virginity:

He was a lot older and there was a bit of pressure there. I wasn't really...you know...I was just learning about it [sex] and there was a bit of pressure. So it wasn't really enjoyable. I don't really remember enjoying sex at that age (28, single).

In contrast to Renee, Lucy did not experience any pressure when she lost her virginity. In fact, she was the instigator of the one night stand

and spoke of the experience as enhancing of rather than detrimental to her self esteem:

I lost my virginity when I was about 15, in a one night stand and it was, I mean, it really was completely an experimental and self esteem thing for me (30, partnered, cohabiting).

For Lucy, sex was not a gift to others, but about proving something to herself and her peers. She was rejecting the sexual double standard in that she actively engaged in casual sexual relationships. This example suggests that sexual experience may be about many things apart from achieving sexual pleasure. Like Renee, Lucy also commented that none of these experiences were sexually pleasurable:

My teenage years were pretty much a succession of one night stands, none of which were sexually fulfilling, all of which were a bit triumphant. Although, followed by the emotional and alcoholic hangover the next day. Feels great at the time then thinking oh god! What am I doing? I think it was mostly about internal conflict between what's feminine and nice and going out and getting laid and pursuing people and so on. And it was an intense thing of what would my mother think? (30, partnered, cohabiting)

This quote reveals the complex and contradictory nature of sex, particularly first sex, for young women. She displays an awareness that she had violated feminine norms but she was also 'triumphant' that she had rid herself of a necessary evil among her peers, that is, her virginity. The loss of virginity stakes her claim to sexual experience thus, to her peers, she becomes knowledgeable and therefore powerful.

In contrast to these participants, Natalie said her experience of first sex was very positive. She and her (then) partner had discussed the act and planned for it. There was active discussion and mutual understanding in the context of an established relationship rather than a one night stand:

I had the best night ever! That [experience] has been quite a strong influence for me. We had been together for ages and I was ready and he was ready, he was a virgin too. He had been waiting for marriage until he met me! Ha! So it was really natural and it didn't hurt (26, single).

According to Holland and colleagues (2000) first sex for young people in an established relationship may offer increased potential for resistance to dominant masculinity and passive femininity. The young couple may have a higher awareness of the possibility of differences between them and the intimacy, love and friendship may create space for negotiation and discussion of the experience. Natalie's experience of first sex offers support to this contention in that they were able to establish the

terms of the encounter as a couple and therefore show resistance to the dominant discourse of heteronormativity.

The Initiative to Initiate

Traditional discourses of heteronormativity suggest initiation of sex and/or relationships is predominantly a man's responsibility. Women are expected to assume the 'gatekeeper' role which serves to keep male desires in check by denying them sexual pleasures and experiences (Averett et al. 2008). This role denies women's desire and pleasure and limits sexual agency. However, as the examples below demonstrate, some of the women in the present study rejected the gatekeeper role and actively showed an interest in initiating sex. The women often showed they were able to take charge of a situation to get the maximum benefit for themselves in terms of sexual pleasure, safe sex, initiation of sex and various sexual practices. One example of initiating sex was through flirting. Olivia discussed 'turning up the flirting a notch' to gauge a response from a prospective partner. She said:

No one wants that big rejection from a guy. I think you know when you are going to be in with a chance so you turn up the flirting a little bit and if you get something back then gauge

that response and if you get a little bit back again then I will go into full Olivia tart mode!! The whole, it's on if you want it to be on. I pretty much lay my cards out there (30, single).

By waiting to judge a man's reaction, presumably a forward response to the flirting or reciprocal flirting, some of the women in this study were protecting themselves from rejection and judgement while simultaneously expressing an interest in sex. Eve also said:

If I thought I had a chance with him I would have perhaps turned on the charm a little more (30, single).

Their subjective interpretations of a man's response would lead either to more flirting or abandonment of pursuit. This method served to preserve their femininity and protect their self-esteem by avoiding 'the big rejection'. So although the women appeared to be taking agency by flirting, they were doing so in a socially acceptable manner which was in line with the sexual double standard. Flirting is a method which encourages the man to respond actively, thus reinforcing feminine passivity.

Interestingly, flirting to initiate sex was universally discussed in the context of a casual affair among this group of women. When referring to initiating sex within a relationship most of the women said the initiation of sex was roughly equal between the partners and there was no

mention of flirting which suggests the requests may have been more explicit. Although, that is not to say that flirting was absent in the context of a relationship. It may have been that the women did not recognise or refer to their actions as flirting or simply did not discuss these actions. In the context of a relationship the women appeared to feel more comfortable and confident to express themselves than when attempting to initiate sex with casual partners.

Having the capacity to initiate sex and sexual practices appeared to enhance the pleasure these women experienced. For the women in this study, the 'safe haven' of a relationship was a context in which they were less likely to be constrained by the rules of femininity. Women may be more comfortable in expressing their sexual needs and wants which can ultimately lead to more satisfaction in their sexual relationships. For example, some of the women discussed their sexual experiences with their partners as 'passionate' (Alice, 29) and 'the best sex I ever had' (Natalie, 26). Alice said:

[Sexual pleasure] is important...if it doesn't work then it has to be worked on in the context of a relationship...The whole idea of a relationship is that you would hopefully know each other well enough or be trying to get know each other well enough that you would be exploring and wanting to make each other feel good (29, partnered, not cohabiting).

This example shows that, in her current relationship, Alice was willing to take charge and ‘work on’ her sexual pleasure. Although she acknowledged in her current relationship she did not need to work on it she said she did not have a problem talking to him about anything at all. There was an inkling here of Giddens’ (1992) ‘pure relationship’, a relationship based on trust and democracy and sexual and emotional equality. It is a relationship that is open to negotiation and experimentation, to which Alice’s narrative offers support. For Alice, the confidence to take agency in relationships and initiate sex and sexual practices resulted in a satisfying sexual relationship.

Experience, Reflexivity and Greater Embodiment in the ‘the Moment’ of Sex

Giddens’ (1992) suggests that in late modern society, self and sexual identities are reflexively achieved and are constantly in motion. Reflexivity or the capacity for ongoing self-reflection structures social and sexual activity and guides behaviour through sources such as mass media and peer interactions. Overlien argues ‘the capacity for self-reflection opens up a number of courses of action and makes young women agents in their own lives’ (2003, p.361). The practice of reflexivity may allow young people to choose a different mode of sexual practice based on mutual, reciprocal and consensual sex (Powell 2008, p.171). Through interaction with others and a process of reflexivity the

social self becomes embodied and individual sexual subjectivities are formed.

In keeping with the above observation, most of the women reported enjoying sex more now that they are older, more experienced or more comfortable with their bodies and with themselves. When Alice was asked what has changed over the course of her life as a sexually active women she said:

For me [receiving] oral sex, as a younger person I really struggled with it. I thought that they weren't enjoying it...I just wanted it to be over and I didn't really want them to do it all, I just couldn't relax. And certainly now, these days, I enjoy it... I have certainly developed and had conversations...and I am not feeling anxious about having it done nice and quickly for them (29, partnered, not cohabiting).

Through initiating and reflecting on discussions and experiences with different sexual partners, Alice was able to establish that her partner giving her oral sex was not something partners did because they felt obliged to. She is now able to enjoy various sexual practices as a result of her sexual experiences and her capacity for reflecting on these and discussing them with a partner. She is less concerned with the male being happy and more concerned about enjoying the moment together, as equal

partners. Giddens' (1992) concept of plastic sexuality, that is, a sexuality that is bound up in the self and decentred from gender roles was applicable to Alice and most of the other participants. Plastic sexuality is not about reproduction or framed around the importance of male sexuality. Rather, it is about making sure both people are active reciprocal participants in their sexual experiences and getting the maximum enjoyment out of each encounter.

The women discussed their experiences of pleasure and agency in various ways. Most were active in attending and responding to their bodies which often led to a pleasurable sexual embodiment. This embodiment has the potential for women to discover new bodily pleasures that, in the present study were qualitatively different from earlier experiences. For example, in contrast to Renee's experiences of first sex (discussed above) where she did not enjoy the encounters and reported feeling pressured, she now says:

Well I definitely enjoy sex more now than when I was younger. I understand my own body more and what I like and what turns me on. So that's changed...my sexual pleasure has increased (28, single).

As shown in this quote Renee has moved beyond just having sex with men just because they wanted it and is now enjoying her embodiment in her sexual encounters.

Most of the women related their enjoyment of sex back to the level of experience they had had. For example, Olivia had had sex with over 50 people and said:

Sleeping with different people lets me understand how a guy works in the sense of when he is about ready to come and I can sense it. You can start to tell now. But with inexperience you are not going to get any satisfaction (30, single).

Olivia discussed having a 'knowledge' of sex and sexual practices that has contributed to the development of her confidence and her level of comfort with her sexual history and sexual behaviours:

I think what's changed is I have become more comfortable as well. Not only did I have that turning point where I became more confident or you know, had this knowledge shall we say. But I think I have become more comfortable. Like, I am comfortable with the fact that I am comfortable with my sexuality or my desires.

The 'knowledge' that Olivia refers to was gained through a sexual experience in which her (casual) partner communicated positive reflections on her sexual abilities. Through this experience she became more confident and was able to enjoy subsequent sexual encounters

(casual or ongoing) more than she had in her first sexual relationship which has lasted five years. Therefore, her sexual agency and sexual pleasure increased through knowing her capabilities and it was her sexual experiences that provided this knowledge. Alice's comments provided further support to this claim:

I guess when I was younger I was more interested in the other person being satisfied and...um...being happy with the result. And that probably comes back to self confidence...But now it is more relaxed. I am happy to enjoy the moment (29, partnered, not cohabiting).

Again, Alice demonstrates her self confidence and sexual pleasure have increased as a result of being more sexually experienced. Therefore, through sexual experience and a process of reflexivity most of the participants in this study were able to experience a greater embodiment in the moment of sex and engage in sexual relations that were based on mutual, reciprocal and enjoyable sex.

Conclusions

This chapter sought to explore the effect of experience and reflexivity on the participant's embodiment of sexual relations by

analysing experiences of first or early sexual relationships through to enjoyment of sex in later life. The results showed that for young women, early sexual encounters in casual relationships often lack pleasure and were engaged in for the benefit of peers, be it a sexual partner or a peer group. In addition, the results revealed the complex and contradictory nature of early sexual relationships. Where there was resistance to the dominant discourse of heteronormativity, it was met with internal conflict for having violated such norm. The absence of knowledge and experience to make sense of sexual situations resulted in conflicting emotions and pressured sex. However, for one participant, the safety of a relationship facilitated discussion and negotiation of the experience of first sex which ultimately served to enhance the experience. Therefore, consistent with prior research (e.g. Holland et al. 2000; Tolman 1994) creating space for women to discuss sexual feelings may enhance the possibility of resistance to dominant discourses which in turn may improve their early sexual experiences.

The positive effects of creating spaces were further supported in discussions about initiating sex. Casual sexual relationships, in which flirting was a method used to initiate sex, reinforced the sexual double standard by encouraging the active man and passive women. In contrast, the safety of a relationship allowed the participants to work on their sexual pleasure with their partners which reflected tenets of Giddens' (1992) 'pure relationship'.

Despite the aforementioned issues with early sexual experiences and initiation of sex, it seems for these participants the pleasure they take in the act of sex, regardless of relationship status, is improving. This seems largely due to experience, both life and sexual, as well as the capacity for reflexivity. Through increased knowledge and confidence the participants reported being more comfortable and confident with sex and being able to enjoy sex, including a variety of sexual practices, more so than in their younger years.

Chapter 5: Persistence and Resistance to the Sexual Double Standard

Louisa Allen (2003) has recently commented that the notion that girls want love and boys want sex is outdated. Young women's experiences of sexual agency, desire and pleasure are complex and contradictory in contemporary society as there are great differences in the way men and women are expected and allowed to be sexual as a double standard places limits on sexual expression, particularly for young women (Averett et al. 2008). Accommodation to the sexual double standard is rarely explicitly stated, but rather emerges from young women's talk about their sexual lives which indicates that sexual subjectivity is a very complex phenomenon.

Research is showing there is resistance to these normative standards to some extent but many young women also still ascribe to the dominant discourse despite believing they are powerful, agential and in control of their sexual lives (Jackson & Cram 2003; Maxwell 2007; Stewart 1999). This chapter will explore the influence of heteronormativity and the sexual double standard on the women's sexual attitudes and behaviours. The broad questions to be addressed are do young women see the sexual double standard as having an influence over their sexual lives and experiences? What effect does the sexual double standard have on individual sexual subjectivities at a conscious level and

what is revealed in the young women's talk at a less conscious level? Finally, how does their level of sexual experience influence this? This chapter argues that, consistent with prior research, there is simultaneous accommodation and resistance to the sexual double standard. Resistance tends to be explicitly stated whereas accommodation occurs at a more implicit level and is revealed only through analysis of the women's stories. This suggests that sexual subjectivities are complex and contradictory in the face of dominant discourses. As shown in a brief case study, positioning oneself in an alternate discourse is possible for some women but the role of experience is a crucial factor.

How many is too many? - Reputations and Judgement

In the largest ever Australian survey on sex and sexuality, Richters and Rissel (2005) found that men report higher numbers of sexual partners than women. The authors offer an array of reasons for this discrepancy but conclude that the main reason is that men exaggerate and women underestimate the number of partners they have had. They argue women present themselves as less sexually active to avoid attracting negative labels such as 'slut'. This is an example of the sexual double standard which suggests women should be less promiscuous than men, therefore, fewer sexual partners are expected for women. When

discussing her own attitudes towards number of sexual partners, Olivia said:

I know that is like a real stereotype but for me, I automatically assume that guys have slept with more people than girls have when I meet them (30, single).

Olivia had slept with over 50 men and considered herself to be sexually experienced. Despite her level of sexual experience this quote demonstrates persistence to the sexual double standard as the stereotype that women are expected to have fewer partners than men is still in play. However, she continued to say that judging 'guys or girls' on numbers of sexual partners should not be important. So although she explicitly stated her resistance to the sexual double standard in that believed the number of sexual partners should not be an issue, she also showed persistence to the sexual double standard in her assumptions.

Natalie revealed she still felt more comfortable if the men she was having sex with had slept with more people than her. Despite liberal views on female sexuality and discussions about the positive effects of equality in sexual relations, Natalie said:

As my number [of sexual partners] gets bigger, their number can get bigger!!...If I have slept with less men, I actually feel more comfortable. I can't really explain that. It's just how I

feel... like maybe I think that men would find me more attractive if I had slept with less men rather than the first way around because that whole stigma to do with being a slut (26, single).

Above, Natalie struggles to explain her feelings then eventually does so by drawing on the dominant discourse of heteronormativity. She thought if she had slept with less people than her partners they would view her in a more positive light. The discourse of heteronormativity was the only discourse available to her for explaining and justifying how she felt.

The way these two participants discussed their attitudes towards acceptable numbers of sexual partners revealed conflicting information. In the context of the whole interview, they both discussed liberal attitudes towards sex and sexual behaviours and both said they felt sorry for people with low numbers of sexual partners. However, the quotes above suggest the degree to which they have also internalised the dominant norms. These conflicting responses indicate that, for these women, escaping the sexual double standard and the discourse of heteronormativity is difficult.

Further, when discussing how other people may view her level of experience, Olivia said:

I am over the 50 mark and I don't go and brag about my conquests so I don't expect that people are going to judge me for it. I'm not ashamed of it (30, single).

This quote demonstrates an implicit expectation of judgement if she was to 'brag about her conquests'. Hird and Jackson (2001) found that multiple sexual relationships for women were not seen as 'ladylike'. Showing an interest in sex had the potential to result in negative labelling such as 'slut' or 'whore' and violates traditional femininity. By avoiding talking about sexual relationships and sexual behaviours women are protected from negative social sanctions.

The complexity of the above quotation is revealed in Olivia's defiant stance proclaiming that she is 'not ashamed of it' (nor should she be). The repetitive nature of this line throughout various parts of the interview would suggest this is a defensive remark, a mechanism she may have employed to, again, protect herself from judgement. Although her talk is, on the surface, resisting the sexual double standard, the defensive nature of her language and her expectation of judgement suggest the sexual double standard permeates at a less conscious level.

According to Holland and colleagues, the double standard of sexual reputations not only exists but is also a powerful mechanism for regulating sexual expectations and practices as it is a point of reference for young people (Holland et al. 1996). As discussed above, this double standard suggests that if women 'sleep around' they acquire negative

reputations such as 'slut', 'whore' or 'slag'. This is contrast to men, where sleeping around serves to enhance masculinity and acts as positive reinforcement for such behaviours (Holland et al. 1996, p.242). Research conducted with teenage girls indicates once acquired, a reputation is not only hard to shake but may also have negative social sanctions such as exclusion or abuse (Hird & Jackson 2001) and may have implications for safe sex practices, for example, it may not be acceptable for women to be assertive or prepared and carry condoms as this behaviour violates the norm of feminine passivity (Hawkes & Scott 2005).

It is important to note that the women in this study did not explicitly discuss the implications of reputations beyond their school experiences or into adulthood. This suggests that as the women grew more confident and comfortable with their sexualities there was less emphasis placed on social sanctions and the women were able to make sense of their sexual lives and their sexual subjectivities through interpretations of their experiences and bodily practices.

One possibility that reputations are less of an issue for older 'young' women could be due to increased distance between the peer group and the individual. For example, school and university college's forces people to interact with members of the peer group on a regular basis. Beyond the school years, individuals are presented with opportunities to be more selective in whom they spend their time with, thus older 'young' women may have distinctly different peer groups which are centred on choice of friends. Some people may choose to

spend time with others who are similar to them or value them for who they are rather than a relationship of convenience or proximity as is possible in school relationships. Thus the risk of judgement may be reduced. Interestingly, Olivia discussed her friendship group as being very close since high school. As shown in the previous section Olivia thought she would be judged if she bragged about her conquests. This suggests that her concern for a reputation was still an issue and the proximity of her friendship group may be a factor in this concern. However, this study can only speculate the influence of proximity of friendship groups and future research should attempt to examine this possibility further.

In addition to judgement from peer groups, young women, regardless of social circumstances, are also under surveillance from partners. For example, Renee discussed a previous relationship where her partner was judgemental of her sexuality. He looked down on her for being ‘too sexy’ and thought her sexual behaviours and practices were often inappropriate:

Well I mean I have had one sexual relationship that wasn't enjoyable because he was just a judgemental partner of female sexuality. So it changed my enjoyment of sex but it didn't change who I am (28, single).

His reactions to Renee acting on her desires were so negative that eventually the relationship ended. She was not willing to silence her desires for the sake of the relationship. Renee goes on to discuss a more recent relationship that was very sexually fulfilling:

One of the reasons I enjoyed [sex] so much with my [most recent] partner is because he never judged me about my sexuality....Just being sexy and doing different things...he celebrated that.

These quotes demonstrate that Renee's judgemental partner changed her enjoyment of sex as she was not able to express her desires without judgement. She continues to compare her sexual partners throughout the interview and stresses the importance of her partner's openness to female sexuality. She says recent encounters with 'random' men have not been 'anything special' as she still feels she cannot express herself completely for fear of judgement. So her ability to act on her desires in the face of perceived male attitudes influenced her pleasure and enjoyment of her sexual relationships. This suggests men's feedback can be an important part of women's sexual subjectivities.

Passivity, Vulnerability and Experience

In this section I was particularly interested to see how the older 'young' women discussed negotiation of sexual practices to determine if their experiences of the influence of the sexual double standard were different from that of prior research with adolescents. Some of the women in this study discussed engaging in sexual practices that they did not find enjoyable. The women discussed a variety of reasons for engaging in less pleasurable practices such as curiosity, doing it for the sake of the relationship and pressure from partners. For example, Natalie constructed herself as a passive and vulnerable participant when she engaged in anal sex with her partner. She clearly received no pleasure from the experience:

I mean I have had anal sex once and I probably wouldn't do it again because it was just gross. He initiated it. He suggested it quite a few times and eventually I said ok... It was horrible. I was like, how can you be enjoying this when you can see that I am clearly not!? (26, single)

This quote shows that Natalie felt pressure from her partner to participate in the act and appeared vulnerable to this pressure. For women, passivity is the cornerstone of the sexual double standard.

Passivity and vulnerability may be a precursor to sexual coercion (Hird & Jackson 2001). Hird and Jackson argue the women's negotiations in their study were highly dependent upon notions of femininity and the sexual double standard despite the women's belief's that they were independent of the dominant discourse of heteronormativity (2001, p.41). In contrast to this literature, Natalie's sexual agency was not wholly determined by the sexual double standard. Natalie said she engaged in this sexual act out of curiosity for herself and in the negotiation of the sexual practice Natalie was able to take agency and have sex on her own terms. For example, when describing the experience with anal sex further, she explains she had to be '100% in charge in a lot of ways' and in a position where she could tell him to 'back off' at any time. Although there was initial pressure from her partner to engage in anal sex, it was Natalie who set the terms of the practice.

It is important to note that negotiating sexual practices for Natalie became easier with experience. She said:

The more you have it or the fact you've had it makes it easier [to negotiate]...I think when you are in a relationship or you have got that sexual dialogue with someone it's actually easier. I think as you become more in charge of yourself in all aspects of your life I think sex is naturally a part of that (26, single).

This quote shows that with both life and sexual experiences Natalie's capacity to engage in sexual negotiations was easier which in turn made sex itself easier.

The Complexity of the Sexual Double Standard – A Brief Case Study

It has been well established that positive and empowering discourses of female desire are absent from traditional discourses of heteronormativity (Allen 2003). The absence of a discourse for female sexuality may result in confusion about sexual feelings and desires which may lead to bad choices in sexual relationships (Gilmartin 2006; Tolman 1994). For example, when Lucy recalls the loss of her virginity she says she was 'intensely proud' but also felt 'like rubbish the next day' and asked herself 'why would I do something so seedy?' She refers to other sexual experiences in her teenage years as 'a bit triumphant' but also comments they were never about pleasure:

It was always a self esteem thing, you know like I can prove that just as much as the others at school that I can go out and get laid on the weekend. Sometimes by hotter guys!!...It was never anything about pleasure (30, partnered, cohabiting).

Although Lucy may have felt good at times engaging in casual sexual relationships, she also questioned her behaviours after the event. She said she experienced excitement before the event and mixed emotions afterwards but what has remained a powerful reminder of these events are intense feelings of ‘what would my mother think?’ She says the closest description for her emotions was shame and insecurity over how ‘unfeminine I had been in pursuing sexual pleasure’. This suggests there was an element of confusion as to why she was engaging in the behaviours in the first place but also highlights the negative influence of the sexual double standard.

Lucy talks of her current relationship as though sex is something she does to manage the relationship. Since settling into this long term relationship and having a child she now says she is bored by sex and does not get aroused as easily:

Since I had my child, it is mostly a chore. As sort of like, you know every couple of weeks like you know let’s get this over with. In truth now, it is mostly a mechanism for keeping the relationship on track more so than anything I am particularly interested in... I can think of 19 things that I would rather be doing.

Within the sexual double standard, relationship management capabilities typically refer to a woman’s ability to be passive and

responsive to a male's needs and desire. I would argue for Lucy this was not the case. Lucy says her partner is a man that has 'no emotional language' and therefore, he uses sex as a way to connect to her. Lucy, on the other hand, often feels alienated from her partner during the act of sex and does not see it as something she needs to feel closer to him:

I still often feel quite alienated from him when we are naked in bed doing sexual things. I quite often have a little mental collapse where I can't reconcile the two people. It's just a different him. There is an innate vulnerability about people when they are involved in sex which I find confronting.

These examples show Lucy's sexual subjectivity has changed with her experiences and is dependent on the social context. However, there are similarities between her earlier sexual experiences and her later ones in that throughout her life as a sexually active woman, her sexual experiences have served a function. She seems emotionally disconnected from the act of sex which may be a mechanism she employs to avoid vulnerability and to show that she actively positions herself in a place of power. Lucy refers to herself as 'typically masculine and assertive' and says a number of times throughout the interview that she is 'such a man' in her approach to sex. In positioning herself in this way, Lucy achieves a kind of 'masculine sexuality' (Bryant & Schofield 2007, p.327). Bryant and Schofield (2007) argue women often feel a sense of guilt or self-

doubt as a result of this re-positioning however these emotions did not factor into the discussion with Lucy. Therefore, she appears to be resisting the sexual double standard by being active and powerful in her approach and not experiencing subsequent negative emotions. However, in order to achieve this she must position herself 'as a man' which reinforces the sexual double standard by positing masculinity as powerful.

Conclusions

Sexual experience contributes to the formation of sexual subjectivities and was therefore expected to play a role in the level of resistance to heteronormativity in the young women's narratives. Very little research has addressed the role of sexual experience as most of the current literature focuses on first or early sexual experiences for adolescents or teenagers. This study attempted to minimise this gap in the existing literature.

All of the women demonstrated resistance to the sexual double standard by reporting being active in their sexual relationships at some point throughout the interviews. However, as this chapter has shown, for the participants in this study the sexual double standard is pervasive but sexual behaviours and experiences were not always shaped by it. For example, although research suggests higher numbers of sexual partners

for men is expected, the women in this study believed it is not important who has higher numbers than whom. However, persistence to the sexual double standard was revealed implicitly in some of the participant's assumptions and expectations of their sexual partners. Further, one woman demonstrated the absence of an acceptable alternative discourse to heteronormativity as she struggled to explain her attitude towards being more comfortable if the men she was sleeping with had slept with more people than her. This suggests that she, and others in the study, may have internalised the dominant discourses. Further, when discussing others' attitudes towards sexual behaviours, one woman recognised the dangers in talking about her sexual conquests as it is not perceived as 'ladylike' to engage in or discuss sexual activity for women. Therefore, remaining silent preserved her femininity and protected her from negative sanctions.

This chapter also argued that reputations are a form of social control or a point of reference for young people. Although the importance of reputations may diminish beyond school and college years, for some participants in this study it appears perceived male attitudes may affect their sexual pleasure and thus contribute to their sexual subjectivities. If a woman assumes the sexual double standard is adhered to by her partner she may not express herself completely for fear of judgement.

Some of the women in this study reported engaging in sexual practices that they did not find enjoyable. In contrast to most of the

research that reports on adolescent experiences, the women in this study appeared to have different reasons for engaging in such behaviours, such as curiosity. One participant was able to clearly state the terms of an encounter, thus took agency in the event and engaged in it on her own terms. This clearly showed resistance to the sexual double standard. Further, her ability to negotiate the sexual relationship was facilitated by her previous sexual experiences.

Finally, Lucy's case study demonstrates that a sense of empowerment in sexual relationships is possible by positioning oneself in alternative discourses that do not emphasise desire or pleasure in sex. Lucy's experiences with sex are considerably different to the other participants in that for her, sex serves a function. It was a means of bolstering her relationships, be it with peers or her partner. In the early years of her sexual life, the sexual double standard was influential and this seems to have implicitly persisted as she now positions herself as masculine as her sexual behaviours are not legitimately feminine. This reinforces the sexual double standard as it acceptable for a man to be powerful but not a woman.

Overall, this chapter demonstrated that the pervasiveness of the sexual double standard is a complex phenomenon. I would argue it is one that warrants further investigation with older 'young' women to assess the effect of sexual experience on this cohort's attitudes and behaviours. There is absence of research outside of the adolescent experiences and, while this is an important group worthy of study, it important not to

neglect others who may still be constrained by the existence of the sexual double standard, especially as most of the stories discussed here reveal it's implicit nature. The effect of experience on sexual agency, sexual pleasure and sexual desire may contribute to our understanding of how the sexual double standard persists in some areas and not others.

Chapter 6: Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

The women's experiences of their sexual lives and subjectivities discussed in this thesis demonstrate that sexual agency, pleasure and desire are complex and often contradictory experiences. Resisting the dominant discourses of heteronormativity and opening the lines of discussion for young women so that sex is something women can talk about is crucial for women to know and acknowledge their desires and their entitlement to pleasurable sexual experiences in which they are equal partners with the men they are having sex with.

This chapter will reflect on the discussions thus far and consider the aims of the thesis to provide a final analysis of these results. It will also address the limitations and implications of this research for future studies.

Discussion and Evaluation of Main Findings

Above all, this research has demonstrated that the participant's experiences of sex and sexuality were complex and contradictory. Their sexual subjectivities appeared influenced by the dominant discourses of heteronormativity, as well as individual experiences that did not so easily conform to this. Overall, there was a sense of a progress narrative in the

women's stories in that, for most of them, sex was now a more enjoyable experience than their earlier encounters. The women reported feeling more relaxed, in control and some experienced what Bryant and Schofield (2007) refer to as pleasurable sexual embodiment. Improvements in sexual relationships seemed largely attributable to experience, knowledge and an increased capacity for reflexivity. In addition, the participants were more confident and comfortable within themselves.

However, discussions of the experience of desire revealed contradictions in the women's narratives. Consistent with previous literature, the inconsistencies in the women's stories were most prominent when they discussed acting on their desires. The women in this study felt empowered at an intellectual level but when attempting to put this into practice some voiced struggles in the face of heteronormativity which suggests the dominant discourse is still influential in terms of achieving a sense of sexual empowerment. Overall, these contradictions were less pronounced as the women became more experienced and were able to develop a critical consideration which often led to feelings of greater empowerment and entitlement to sex. For example, regardless of relationship status, the women with more sexual partners and more diverse sexual experiences were able to take a proactive stance to sex and create spaces to speak of their desires without fear of negative sanctions. They recognised the value of reciprocity in

their relationships and to some degree were achieving it, particularly in long term relationships.

By comparison, the women's descriptions of their early sexual experiences showed a distinct lack of knowledge, pleasure and agency and were often engaged in for the benefit of others such as the peer group or partner. However, the stability of a relationship in early sexual experiences served to enhance the experience for one participant as it created space for negotiations and discussions thus enhancing the experience. Her ability to negotiate was also shown in more recent sexual experiences where she showed she was able to have sex on her own terms thus resisting the sexual double standard.

Overt resistance to the sexual double standard was explicitly stated by these women. However, implicit in many of their stories was the persistence to the sexual double standard. For example, the defensive language used by Olivia when saying she was 'not ashamed' of her sexual conquests and her reluctance to speak of them showed that reputations may still be an issue beyond school and college years as the dangers in speaking about sexual experiences was recognised, albeit implicitly. It was apparent that reputations were still a form of social control that they were unable to escape.

As Lucy's case study showed us, sexual agency has a complicated relationship to notions of desire and pleasurable sexual embodiment. Lucy chose to manage her relationship in a way that suited her, thus showing agency and power. However, it was this re-positioning in an

alternative discourse that showed the persistence of the dominant discourses. There was no acceptable subject position that allowed her to be active, powerful *and* feminine, thus she positioned herself as masculine.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it is important to recognise that these results are not, nor do they intend to be, generalisable to a larger population. In addition, although the women were diverse in their relationship statuses, they were all well educated, inner urban dwellers and as such their experiences should not be read as representative of all women's experiences. As mentioned earlier, race and socioeconomic status is expected to play a role in the formation of sexual subjectivities and warrant exploration. To do so in this project would have denied a thorough examination of the research questions as it was beyond the scope of a study this size.

More detailed, longitudinal, life history research was beyond the scope of this project but may be beneficial in further exploring the role of experience in the formation of young women's sexual subjectivities and their experience of sexual agency, desire and pleasure. Stein argues this method leads 'one to seek out the diversity, ambiguity, and negotiation in the construction of an individual's life' (1999, p.202) as such is an

appropriate method for sexuality research which explores the role of experience. A longitudinal study would also be valuable for a more accurate recording of how the participants felt in more immediate terms. Stein also argues that people actively reconstruct their histories to suit their needs, thus longitudinal research may eliminate this bias.

Future research should endeavour to expand on this small project and conduct further empirical studies on this cohort of women, that is, women who are beyond school or university age as this is a group of women who are largely ignored in the literature. Although these women's stories suggest a move towards egalitarianism is possible, the analysis shows that this change is complex and contradictory in the face of dominant discourses. Sexual experience appeared to be a crucial factor in the formation of these women's sexual subjectivities and as such, warrants further exploration.

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Appendix A: Project Information and

Consent Form



Project name:

Young women and sexual agency: Attitudes on heterosexual relationships, pleasures and desires

You are invited to take part in a research project. The research will explore the factors influencing young women's sexual expression and practices as a means to highlight differences in standards of sexual behaviour for young women and young men when engaging in [hetero]sexual relationships. This research aims to explore young women's subjective experiences and understandings in their [hetero]sexual relationships.

The researcher on the project is Meg Louth and her supervisor is Dr Deborah Dempsey, Swinburne University of Technology.

YOUR PARTICIPATION

Your participation will involve taking part in one face-to-face interview with Meg. The interview should take between one and two hours to complete. The interview will be conversational in tone, rather than guided by a set list of questions. You will be asked to discuss your personal experiences, beliefs and attitudes on heterosexual relationships, pleasure and desire. Further to this the interviewer will ask you for some background information about yourself (e.g. your age, relationship status, ethnicity.)

The interview will be digitally recorded with your permission. You have the right to refuse to answer any question asked of you and to discontinue the interview at any time. You also have the right to withdraw from the project if you change your mind after the interview. As interview materials will be made anonymous, should you wish to

withdraw all or part of the information you provide, we ask that you do so within two weeks of the interview.

The topics covered in the interview are quite personal. For this reason, a list of counselling services and other sources of support is provided at the bottom of the page should you feel you need any support.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

The following steps will be taken to ensure your interview remains confidential and anonymous. Information you provide at the interview will not be disclosed to others except anonymously in the course of reporting the research results in publications or papers such as academic conference papers and journal articles. The recordings of the interview will be erased after it has been transcribed and checked. The transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and/or in a password protected computer file accessible only to the student researcher. Any link between your name and your interview transcript will only be known to the student researcher and will be destroyed after follow up. Information that could potentially identify you to readers of project publications will be changed. For example, people you refer to in the interview will be given false names, ages, jobs etc.

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

If you have any further questions, or are unhappy with any aspect of the interview or research process, feel free to contact the Research Supervisor, Dr Deborah Dempsey, Faculty of Life and Social Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology on (03) 9214 4374. If you have any concerns or would like to make a complaint about the conduct of this project you can contact:

Research Ethics Officer,

Swinburne Research

Swinburne University of Technology

PO Box 218, HAWTHORN VIC 3122

Tel (03) 9214 5218 (or +61 3 9214 5218

Or email: resethics@swin.edu.au

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

The phone numbers, websites and email addresses may be useful to you if you feel you need support at any time.

Lifeline 13 11 14 (24 hour counselling service)

Women's Information Centre, WIRE 1300 134 130 or www.wire.org.au (services include free information, support and referrals to women across Victoria).

Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA) 1800 806 292 or email ahcasa@rwh.org.au

Consent Form

Title of project: Young women's sexual agency

Investigators: Meg Louth, Swinburne University of Technology; Dr Deborah Dempsey, Swinburne University of Technology

I consent to participate in the project named above. I have been provided with a copy of the project consent information statement and this consent form and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

Please circle your response to the following:

I consent to be interviewed by the researcher	Yes	No
I agree to allow the interview to be digitally recorded	Yes	No
I agree to make myself available for further information if required	Yes	No

I acknowledge that:

- a. my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation;
- b. the project is for the purpose of research and not for profit;
- c. my personal information will be collected and retained for the purpose of carrying out this project;
- d. My anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained.

By signing this document you agree to participate in this project.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT.....

SIGNATURE.....DATE.....

NAMES/S OF PRICIPAL INVESTIGATORS.....

SIGNATURE.....DATE.....

SIGNATURE.....DATE.....

Appendix B: Background Information Sheet

Please complete the following information sheet. I would again like to remind you that you are under no obligation to respond to questions should you wish not to and you can withdraw at any point. I would like to remind you that we will maintain anonymity in the reporting of the information gleaned from this interview through the use of pseudonyms.

What year were you born in?	
What is the highest level of education you have completed?	
What country were you born in?	
What is your ethnicity/cultural background?	
What is your occupation?	
Are you currently practising a religion? If yes, which one?	

Appendix C: Draft Interview Schedule

Intro: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project. I would like to remind you that you are under no obligation to respond to questions should you wish not to and you can withdraw at any point. I would like to remind you that we will maintain anonymity in the reporting of the information gleaned from this interview through the use of pseudonyms.

What interested you in this study? Why did you choose to participate?

Are you currently in a relationship? If yes, can you please tell me about it?

Prompt: How did you meet? How long have you been together?

1. General Attitudes:

What does sex mean to you?

What does sexual pleasure mean to you?

What does sexual desire mean to you?

How many sexual partners do you believe is appropriate for men/women?

2. Sexual Histories:

Can you please tell me about your most recent sexual relationship?

Can you tell me about any significant sexual experiences?

What kind of sexual practices do you and your sexual partner(s) engage in?

Prompt: oral sex, anal sex etc. Do you feel equally comfortable with all of these? What do you think are the reasons for the different levels of comfort/discomfort with these practices?

3. Agency and experience:

Over the course of your life as a sexually active woman, what has changed/remained the same?

Do you feel in control of your sexual relationships?

Do you think your sense of power and control has increased as you have become more sexually experienced? Can you give me some examples?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Conclusion: Thank you for your time. Should you have anything further you would like to contribute to this discussion please feel free to contact me.