
**Abstract**

This article draws on qualitative interviews in order to analyse the ways in which heterosexual women reconcile their everyday lived sexual practices, expectations and desires. Focusing on the accounts of twenty women in long-term relationships, analysis suggests that the sexual practices of the women interviewed continue to be largely conducted within a dominant heteronormative framework. This runs contrary to claims about the democratisation or queering of sexual relations (Giddens 1992; Roseneil 2000). I argue that participants’ sexual desires and expectations are undermined by essentialist understandings of masculinity and femininity, with shifts in the outward forms of heterosexuality having a limited impact upon sexual practices which continue to be entrenched in heteronormative ideals.

**Keywords**: sexual practices, women, heterosexuality, relationships, gender, couples
Introduction

Drawing on two qualitative research projects exploring the sexual and intimate lives of twenty women in long-term heterosexual relationships, this article examines the ways in which participants negotiated their everyday sexual practices, expectations and desires. Contextually, the research was conducted within an apparently increasingly sexually liberated society, accompanied by associated societal pressures for individuals, and particularly couples, to demonstrate sexual proficiency and frequency within their practice. The findings presented here suggest that once in committed long-term heterosexual relationships, participants begin conforming to traditionally gendered roles at the expense of the sexual experimentation and freedoms that they may have previously exercised. However, this was not out of lack of ‘choice’, but often out of a sense of pragmatism (Duncan 2011), as the women interviewed held the demographic characteristics that would have allowed them to capitalise on the posited late modern transformations in sexual practices and personal relationships.

The Liberalisation of (Hetero)Sexuality?

Studies of sexual practices are usefully framed by broader sociological discussions over the nature of contemporary intimate and sexual relationships. The liberalisation of both sexual regulation and attitudes since the 1960s alongside the ubiquity of sexual references and images has given rise to the popular interpretation that western cultures are sexually liberated (Jackson and Scott 2004). Within this context, sociological debate over the extent to which intimate
relationships have been transformed has focussed in particular on accompanying changes in sexual practices. In this new terrain, individualisation theorists such as Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995, 2002) have suggested the possibility of increasing fluidity and freedom in contemporary sexual behaviours and identities. For Giddens, a potential result is the predominance of ‘plastic’ sexuality, in which sex is severed from reproduction and functions as a ‘malleable feature of self’ (Giddens 1992: 15). Manifestations include the separation of female sexual pleasure from heterosexual intercourse and the general replacement of perversion with pluralism; in short, plastic sexuality ‘frees sexuality from the rule of the phallus’ (Giddens 1992: 2). Similarly, Roseneil (2000) highlights the ways in which a ‘queering’ of sexuality has weakened the dominant patriarchal sexual and gender order. Claims about the extent to which sexual identities and practices have been detraditionalised have been contested (see for example Jamieson 1999, Jackson and Scott 2004, Gross 2005). Of particular issue is the idea that heterosexuality is losing its associations with wider gender inequalities and is no longer privileged as the norm. While for young women in particular, there is some evidence suggesting that sexual identity categories may be loosening (Diamond 2008, NATSAL-3 2013), in everyday life heterosexuality has maintained its status as the normative form of sexuality (Jackson and Scott 2010). Within heterosexual sexual practice, empirical evidence also challenges the argument that female sexual pleasure is regarded as important as male. Young people’s accounts of non-coital sexual practices (Lewis et al 2013) are framed in terms of preparation for vaginal intercourse, rather than of having any value in themselves. Of continuing relevance is Holland et al’s (1998) ‘male in the head’, which demonstrated the ways in which young women contribute to the privileging of male sexual
pleasure in heterosexual relationships through the identification of their own needs as being synonymous with those of young men. The sexual double standard, whereby the same sexual behaviour by men and women is interpreted in contradictory ways, remains embedded in Western societies, demonstrating one of the multiple ways in which sexuality underpins women’s subordination (Rahman and Jackson 2010:30).

The sexual practices of non-adolescent heterosexual couples, and in particular the experiences of coupled women, have been largely neglected in sociological research. A focus on subversive and diverse sexual practices means that we still know little about the ‘everyday, mundane, conventional sexual lives’ (Jackson 2008: 34) lived out by couples. With a general celebration within popular culture of sex as special and ‘good for you’ (Jamison 1998: 107), the linking of sex, love and intimacy constructs the sex enjoyed by committed couples as superior. The sexual component of a couple relationship is often what is taken to distinguish it from other significant relationships and indeed elevate it above them (Jackson and Scott 2004). This message is reiterated within therapeutic literature, where the ideal usually promoted confirms that for couples emotional closeness should be accompanied by sexual desire (Perel 2007). Consequently, sex has become defined as the central dynamic of the late modern pair relationship and ‘in this brave new age of sex, the greatest sin is sexual boredom’ (Hawkes 1996: 119). With individualisation theorists arguing that women are at the forefront of transformations in intimate practices, a prioritising of female sexual pleasure appears to have become a more common cultural theme, with the more privileged in particular having more choices and opportunities to explore alternative sexual lifestyles (Jackson 2008: 35). However, Duncan (2011) cautions against optimistic interpretations of the possibilities for individual agency to overcome structural
constraints, and demonstrates that women in particular make decisions about their personal lives pragmatically, with traditional ideas about relationships providing a continuing framework for behaviour.

The research presented here seeks to interrogate a number of these claims about changes in sexual practices when applied to women’s experiences of heterosexual relations. This paper focuses on the sexual practices of women in heterosexual relationships, which addresses a particular omission in sociological knowledge, as women who appear ‘normal’ have become the ‘invisible group’ in sex research, neglected because of their perceived predictability (Montemurro 2014: 69).

Following a discussion of the methodological approach used, the remainder of the paper draws on participants’ accounts of their sexual practices and desires.

**Method**
The data analysed here comes from a larger project researching the extent to which heterosexual couple relationships have become increasingly contingent and detraditionalised (van Hooff 2013) and ongoing research specifically exploring the sexual and intimate lives of a small number of women in long-term heterosexual relationships. The interview transcripts with twelve women aged 20-35 in long-term heterosexual relationships from the earlier study were used for their specific focus on sexual expectations and practices, which was a theme of the research. Sexual and intimate practices are the focus of the current research project, which takes the form of qualitative interviews with eight women aged between 26 and 38, meaning that there is a large quantity of relevant data. Each in-depth interview lasted between one to two hours, and was recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify common themes. The characteristics of both sets of participants are similar in terms of demographic characteristics; indeed,
because of challenges with recruiting participants for the more recent project I reinterviewed one of the participants from the earlier study. As a result, findings from both projects are presented in the paper interchangeably.

All of the participants were educated to at least degree level or equivalent and were employed in professional occupations, meaning that they possess the economic and cultural capital to allow them to benefit from any late modern transformations in intimacy (Jackson and Scott 2004: 240). Recruiting participants for sex research is often problematic (O’Connell Davidson and Layder 1994), and so it proved with these projects. Participants were sampled using convenience and snowball sampling methods, which were useful in attracting participants with similar features, although made for a sample of limited diversity. All of the participants worked full-time, many in similar professional fields, all lived in either North-West or South-East England, only two were parents, they were largely white British (two were mixed race British, one was British Asian), eight were married, seven were engaged to be married and five were cohabiting, and all were in co-resident relationships. The mean age of participants was 33. Any claims relating to factors such as ethnicity or social class are limited by the small sample size, and the paper instead focuses on the qualitative experiences of sexual practices.

Furthermore, as sex is taken to be the most intimate and private element of a relationship, disclosing information about it to an interviewer may have made some participants uncomfortable. While some respondents happily revealed intimate details of their sexual experiences, others were visibly embarrassed and I moved the interview on. I attempted to engage in ‘de-tabooing’ (Lawson 1989: 352) by avoiding terms that carried any
connotations of shame, however I was also conscious of not wanting to ‘trick’ participants into saying more than they were comfortable with revealing. The issues of appropriate language and terminology when researching sexual practices are well documented (Holland et al 1998, Wellings et al 2013), with Eyre (1997) suggesting the use of ‘vernacular term interviews’ in sex research with younger people. While the women interviewed here were older, a version of this technique proved useful whereby I encouraged participants to describe practices in their own words, and then define what was meant if the term was ambiguous (although in all cases ‘sex’ was understood to mean vaginal intercourse). In-depth interviews as a research method created an environment that was particularly useful for eliciting information about the participants’ sexual lives, as in this context they ‘allow the greatest probing of individual knowledge’ (Eyre 1997: 9).

The ethical and methodological issues associated with researching sex and sexuality undermine claims about the extent to which sex has been liberalised within contemporary western societies. For all of the challenges to traditional sexual mores the respondents here continued to understand sex as a private and unique aspect of their relationships. The coding and analysis of the data revealed a blurring between sexual and other intimate practices within relationships, and the heteronormative frameworks that continue to constrain expressions and constructions of desire, as the following section addresses. Against this backdrop, the research presented here aims to contribute to an endeavour to cast light on ‘ordinary sex’ (Jackson 2008) and explores everyday lived sexual practices in long-term heterosexual relationships.

Initiating relationships; expectations and desires

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For the participants in this research sex is universally constructed as an integral part of a couple relationship, to the extent that any perceived ‘lack’ of sex is viewed as abnormal or deviant. When recounting the beginnings of their current relationships participants stressed the importance of sexual compatibility as a deciding factor, in contrast to the ambivalent ways in which women often describe the emotional ‘drift’ into relationships (Carter 2013: 733). The women interviewed had high expectations for the kind of sex they would enjoy in their relationships, as expressed by Jane:

I can’t imagine that if we didn’t click in bed, you know if we weren’t sexually compatible, that you would even start a relationship with someone, it’s really a priority.

In talk about sexual practices, participants often juxtaposed their current sexual lives to previous experiences. Interviewees often revealed changes in sexual practices over the course of their relationships, with a number of the women claiming that they were the more sexually experienced when they entered relationships with their current partners. In a reversal of traditional gender roles, Zoe and Kate reported initiating sexual contact with their partners: ‘Steven was a one night stand [laughs], I totally went after him’ (Zoe): ‘When we started seeing each other I was more experienced’ (Kate). These accounts suggest evidence for the influence of a ‘permissive discourse’ (Hollway 1996:87), in which sex is conceptualised as a matter of pleasure and has a particular focus on the liberalisation of female sexuality, with pre-marital sex having lost its negative associations for women.

The suggestion that young, affluent women are enjoying greater sexual freedoms is supported by participants’ descriptions of
their behaviour before they entered long-term relationships, often in the context of a ‘student’ lifestyle. Carrie explains ‘you have to do the whole sleeping around thing at uni, ‘cause that’s how you learn what you like’. However, there are also unwelcome consequences for women who fail to properly police their own sexual behaviour according to societal norms. As Zoe emphasised, ‘I’ve only slept with five people, so I wouldn’t have to hide it, but a couple of my best friends from college, there’s absolutely no way that their husbands now have any idea what they were like back then.’ Although initially enthusiastic about the casual sexual she enjoyed when single, one participant recounts a negative experience in her first year as an undergraduate student:

I mean there are limits, I do think probably I went too far at times

In what way?
Well, for example when I was a fresher I had this really good group of male friends, next door to us in halls, we used to always hang out, I was always round their flat, but then I slept with two of them, not together obviously, but within about a month [laughs] and after that they stopped speaking to me. It was actually quite upsetting at the time, and it did make me feel, like, dirty or something and it did occur to me that I should be a bit more careful if I didn’t want to be judged. (Carrie)

Carrie’s experiences here illustrate the continuing influence of the sexual double standard; ‘young women continue to be vulnerable to negative identification as ‘sluts’ or ‘slags’ if they are too sexual’ (Rahman and Jackson, 2010: 182). There is continuing pressure for heterosexual women to carefully negotiate the line between appearing overly sexual and sexually
passive or ‘frigid’. While expected to display a degree of sexual proficiency, there are also limits to the sexual behaviour women are permitted to engage in in order to avoid reputational damage and the potential consequences this may have for their ability to attract a partner for a long-term relationship.

The increasing tolerance of casual sex should not necessarily be taken as a shift away from conventional relationship forms within heteronormative discourse. For the participants here, any period of promiscuity was understood to be short-term before they embarked on committed heterosexual relationships; indeed casual sexual encounters were often the ways in which they were introduced to their current partners. These findings are supported by recent research into online texts about the rules of heterosexual casual sex (Farvid and Braun 2013), which revealed that advice was imbued with the underlying message that finding a partner for a long-term relationship should be the ultimate goal for heterosexual users.

While for young single women sexual activity appears to have been liberalised within certain parameters, for these participants a stage of promiscuity and experimentation is time-limited as sexually exclusive, long-term heterosexual relationships become their priority. Yet from the ways in which the women talk about the beginnings of their relationships it is apparent that sex was significant in the earlier stages, both in terms of expectations and actual practices. Chloe describes the way that her experiences have changed in the past decade of cohabiting with her partner; ‘Sex just isn’t the priority that it was when you were single, you know, you don’t have time for all the foreplay, so you just get on with it’. The following section explores the ways in which participants make sense of their everyday sexual practices when contrasted with these early expectations and
societal pressures regarding ‘normal sex’ in heterosexual relationships.

**Everyday Sexual Practice and ‘Normal Sex’**

In relation to the expectations and experiences that characterised the initial relationship stages, an interrogation of sexual practices once a relationship is established is revealing, particularly once the ‘inevitable loss of passion’ (Perel 2007: 4) may have set in. A number of the women interviewed were quick to assert that the sexual aspects of their relationships were ‘normal’, which appeared to be measured in terms of vague statistics derived from the media on the frequency of intercourse:

> I have my minimum, if we don’t have sex once a week then I start to worry…I think once a week’s like the statistical average isn’t it? (Hannah)

> As it is maybe once a month or so. I don’t know. I know the average for a couple in their early thirties like us is a lot higher so it does worry me that something’s wrong, but it’s difficult. (Rachel)

The above excerpts illustrate the importance of discourse (Foucault 1984) in informing the ways participants think about and construct their sexual practices. While any research that endeavours to challenge the ‘special’ status of sex and demystify sexual practices should be welcomed, the proliferation of methodologically dubious figures in the tabloid media contributes to heteronormative depictions of what it means to be a ‘normal’ couple. Although the production of statistics on sexual behaviour is particularly problematic (Gabb 2010: 34), it is apparent that they are often treated as
incontrovertible facts by which individuals and couples measure themselves. Rather than accurately reflecting sexual behaviour, many of these statistics worked to provide a filter for the presentation of participants’ practices in the interviews through their reinforcement of normative aspects of couple relationships.

A robust sex life is taken to be indicative of a healthy relationship by several of the participants, with ‘regular’ sex equated with emotional closeness. Again, sexual practice is the feature that distinguishes and gives couple relationships their unique and special status in the participants’ lives. As Zoe explains; ‘that’s where you have your connection as a couple and if you don’t sleep together then where do you?’; a sentiment endorsed by Rachel: ‘It’s our way of connecting and being together’. The linking of sex, love and intimacy is common practice in relationships, as indicated by the phrase ‘making love’ (Jamieson 1998: 106), and for participants here sexual practices are understood as a key site of ‘doing’ intimacy (Duncombe and Marsden 1993). A lack of sexual frequency in their relationships was interpreted as undermining the quality of a partnership:

We haven’t had sex for so long, I can’t even think. Err… almost a year.

*Does it matter to your marriage?*

Of course, if you’re not having sex then what are you? We might as well be housemates as husband and wife, I don’t really see the point, you stop being emotionally close when that happens. (Amita)

Amita’s description of her marriage reveals much about the normative expectations that accompany heterosexual relationships, with sex distinguishing a couple relationship from
other close non-familial relationships. A couple’s sex life was often regarded by participants as revealing much about the general state of their relationship, with lack of ‘appropriate’ sexual frequency a potential threat to the relationship. Data from the latest National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles suggests that a quarter of couples do not share the same level of interest in sex as their partner (NATSAL-3 2013); however, the expectation that long-term relationships should be our primary sexual outlet remains.

The suggestion that a satisfying sex life is an non-negotiable component of couple relationships undermines claims about sexual liberation in late modernity. The pressure to conform to a contemporary ideal does not represent a complete break from traditional forms of repression, especially as women often bear the responsibility for maintaining the emotional and sexual health of a relationship (Duncombe and Marsden 1993). It has been noted that ‘good housekeeping has now been replaced by “good sex-making”’ (Hawkes 1996: 121) as a late modern feminine ideal. Sexual practices are also loaded with meaning in the context of couple relationships; they are expected to represent a love and closeness beyond the physical act and a lack thereof can be regarded as a major issue. The women interviewed discussed sexual practices less in terms of agency and desire than as part of the labour of a relationship. For many of the participants there appeared to be an (unspoken) agreement that sexual contact should be maintained throughout the course of a relationship. Where this fails to materialise it is a cause of conflict and potential relationship breakdown.

‘Making Love’: The specialness of sex
A common theme that emerged from the findings was sex as an expression of love in long-term relationships, which made it
‘better’ or more meaningful than the sex available in casual
encounters. Participants frequently described sex with their
partners as an emotionally powerful experience, as Jane
explains: ‘when you love them, then it’s much more special,
even if you don’t feel the same kind of, um, lust.’ This was
supported in many of the participants’ accounts, including
Alexa’s: ‘there’s a closeness you have with someone when
you’re married, you’ve got kids, you know each other inside out’
and Kim’s: ‘I do feel closer to him, after and during, it’s
important I think’. The suggestion, supported by popular
understandings of ‘sex between lovers as the ultimate peak of
intimacy’ (Jamieson 1998: 108), is that ‘making love’ operates
as a more ‘mature’, and therefore valid, form of sexual practice.

For these participants sex functions an expression of love and
intimacy within their relationships and is described as an
intimate, reciprocal experience, which suggests that it is
possible for men and women to meet as equals (Hollway 1996).
While remaining critical of dominant frameworks of
heterosexuality we can allow for ‘the element of pleasure in
heterosexual practices’ (Segal cited in Smart 1996:175). That
sex is seen as the element of a relationship in which couples
achieve a heightened sense of closeness reaffirms its status as
‘special’ (Hawkes 1996; Jamieson 1998; Jackson and Scott
2004), or unique from other interactions. While representative of
a number of the participants’ relationships, for others the lack of
a regular or rewarding sex life had become a source of misery
and tension within their relationships.

**Gendered Desires**
The participants were all in dual-income partnerships, which had
the surface appearance of gender equality. However,
heteronormative constructions of highly differentiated male and
female sexual needs were often drawn upon in discussions of sex, alluding to complex issues around gender and power. The ‘male sexual drive discourse’ (Dallos and Dallos 1997: 138), which relies on the assumption that men and women have biologically different sex drives, proved to be particularly influential in framing the ways that participants talked about their sexual desires and practices. Interviewees frequently referenced their partners requests for sex; Teresa’s comment was typical: ‘Men are always up for sex, aren’t they?’, with the difference explained through ‘a basic biological mis-match between men and women’ by Annie. This discourse, which relies on a biological view of women as naturally passive and men as sexually aggressive, places pressure on women to ‘allow’ their partners to have sex with them in return for emotional closeness.

The conceptualisation of sex presented in these accounts suggests that it is often something that men ‘do’ to women rather than an experience based on reciprocal pleasure. Jamieson (1998) argues that sex is defined almost exclusively in terms of penetrative intercourse when discussed in relation to being part of a couple, which is supported here. For the participants, sexual availability is often expressed as one of the compromises involved in being in a long-term relationship with a man. Helen describes the sex in her relationship as ‘like a chore’ and Chloe explains how sex with her partner has evolved into ‘just a quickie, you know for him to get off’ with ‘foreplay’ no longer part of their practice. While there is no suggestion of coercion, several of the participants demonstrate an understanding of the consequences of refusing sex, which could result in their partners’ infidelity or the end of their relationship. Sara explains that providing sex is part of the labour of her relationship:
It would be him that initiates it, you know, I can be tired, but you just feel awful saying no, you don’t want to be one of those women that always has a headache, so it’s easier to do it and just, you know, fake.

As well as being sexually available, in some of the accounts the participants described the pressures they felt to appear sexually desirable to their partners. In this extract, Kate describes negotiating the various demands placed on her body in terms of appearance and sexual availability and the anxiety this causes her:

He’ll criticise me because of my weight, and tell me I need to go to the gym, and then the next minute he’ll be like “do you fancy a shag?”, and it’s like “now let me think, you just basically called me a fat cow, do I feel sexy?”.

Within institutionalised heterosexuality women continue to have a role as the feminine object of men’s desire, which undermines female sexual pleasure, as evidenced in Kate’s account. Many participants talked not only of providing their partners with sex but also of anticipating their ‘needs’, which were prioritised above their own, revealing much about the gendered power processes at work within heterosexual relationships. Sara’s description of ‘faking’ suggests that female climax is an important element of heterosexual sex, however here it takes the form of a gendered performance rather than genuine pleasure. From a feminist perspective it has been argued that as well as providing men with sex, women must also reassure them of their sexual proficiency through the assimilation of pleasure (Rahman and Jackson 2010: 189). The modern expectation that women should be sexually available and receptive has been
accompanied by an obligation to exercise these desires through heterosexual sex (Hawkes 1996), which has retained its phallocentric framework in my participants’ definitions at least. In their extensive study of heterosexual relationships, Duncombe and Marsden (1993) revealed that women’s emotional work extended to the bedroom, with their female respondents faking desire and agreeing to unwanted sex, in common with many of the participants in this research.

There was also evidence of agency and rejection of normative practice in a number of the interviewees’ accounts. After six years in a relationship, one participant confronted her partner about their non-coital sexual practices, which had so far failed to result in orgasm for her:

He would always orgasm and I wasn't, so I said we could get a vibrator and he could use it on me. And at first he was, I think he though I meant a penetrative one to replace him [laughs]. He didn’t understand about clitoral stimulation. Anyway we got one. 

So you're able to suggest things?

Yeah, well as long as he doesn't see it as a threat to his masculinity or the type of sex we have, well then yeah. (Kim)

Kim carefully negotiated this point by reassuring her partner that this was an ‘issue’ with female anatomy rather than anything lacking in his masculinity. This extract indicates that while there is the potential for creativity within normative sexual practices, it has to be negotiated within a heteronormative, phallocentric framework which prioritises male sexual pleasure.
The dominance of the male sex drive discourse in understandings of gender relations meant that it was particularly challenging for those participants who were dissatisfied with the sexual frequency in their relationships to articulate their desires. As desire is usually positioned as masculine, it is at odds with femininity and remains problematic for women to openly express (Tolman 2005). Women may rationalise the mis-match between their own and their partners’ sex ‘drives’ by excusing their partners, as Laura did: ‘I definitely want regular sex, but to be honest we do have a lot less. Sometimes I try to encourage Niall but he’s not always up for it being tired from work’. There was also a tendency for participants to take on responsibility for the issue, as illustrated in Ali and Amita’s accounts: ‘I do wonder what’s wrong with me that he doesn’t want to do it more’ (Ali); ‘I’ve tried everything, I think he just stopped wanting me’ (Amita). While these participants expressed dissatisfaction about the frequency of intercourse in their relationships, this was attributed to external factors (for example a partner being tired from work), or because of their own lack of desirability. Similar research conducted in a US based study (Wyse et al 2009) found that heterosexual women tend to apologise for desiring more sexual contact than their male partners.

Where popular discourses or scripts are not available for participants to draw on, explaining their experiences became difficult and their accounts are laced with doubt. In particular there is the suggestion that women who fail to maintain a certain level of desirability are at fault for their partners’ waning libidos. These respondents recognised their sexual desires as important and often initiated sexual contact with their partners, yet at the same time their actions are undermined by the ‘should’ of heterosexual partnerships. The idea that sex is
something men do to women is a popular sexual script (Simon and Gagnon 1984); where women in heterosexual relationships are dissatisfied with the level of sexual frequency, traditional sexual scripts are not available for them to draw on and participants tended to pick fault with their relationship or themselves. As Tolman (2005) suggests, women learn to conceal their own sexual desires while continuing to appear sexually available in order to maintain their desirability to men.

Within the majority of the participants’ relationships, their partners’ sexual pleasure takes precedence over their own. Their accounts suggest that this is in part because of the common understanding that sex is something that men do to women, and partly because female desire is limited by heteronormative frameworks that do not provide women with the language to openly express their experiences or desires. For example, when asked about masturbation, participants responded with awkwardness, evasiveness or laughter. There persists what Michelle Fine (1988) terms a ‘missing discourse of desire’ with regards to female sexuality. The relative cultural invisibility of female masturbation in comparison to male (Fahs and Frank 2013) may contribute to women’s silences when it comes to expressing what gives them sexual pleasure. As indicated by other research (Lewis et al 2013), the purpose of non-coital stimulation of women is usually to prepare them for penetrative intercourse, and sexual encounters are generally understood to have concluded upon male climax. There are echoes of Holland et al’s ‘male in the head’ (1998), with women largely defining their own needs as synonymous with men’s, leading to a privileging of male sexual pleasure within heterosexual relationship.
The participants of this research were in possession of the requisite capital to reject unsatisfactory sexual relationships if they had wanted to explore alternative arrangements, yet the suggestion here appeared to be that the social legitimation (Duncan 2011) which accompanies marriage or cohabitation was of more importance. Zoe explained her pragmatism in the following terms; ‘there’s no point leaving as it’ll just be the same [with a different partner] in a few years’. Rachel reconciled her lack of sexual satisfaction in terms of how she understood her position in the lifecourse: ‘I have to think about the future, I’m thirty-five, I want a family, I don’t have time to start again with someone else’. Three other participants confessed to infidelity, which was justified as a response to lack of sexual satisfaction in the primary relationship, but conducted covertly in order not to threaten that relationship. Even for these women, monogamy was regarded as the default position for relationships, with little or no room for open renegotiation. Monogamy was conceived of as the ‘natural mode of human relating’ (Barker and Langdridge 2010: 750) in participants’ discussions, with the consequences of affairs viewed as potentially disastrous. However, non-monogamy in heterosexual relationships may be a way for women to exercise their agency and desire in defiance of dominant institutionalised heterosexuality (Robinson, 1997), and Amita reported how her experience of infidelity enabled her to separate from her husband ‘it made me realise I don’t want to live like this anymore’ and reclaim her own sexuality.

A lingering belief in the ‘naturalness’ of heterosexuality, with particular reference to ‘biological’ drives, allows oppressive discourses and practices to persist alongside more contemporary ideas about sexuality (Hockey et al 2002), undermining emphases on female pleasure. There is limited evidence here to support Giddens’s (1992) claim that sex has
been removed from the power of the phallus, at least within heterosexual relationships. The everyday realities of long-term heterosexual relationships undermine egalitarian ideals and the ‘marital bed’ continues to be a scene of ‘confusion and deception’ (Jackson 1996: 72), with heteronormative discourses dominant in the gendered expectations of performance and pleasure in the sexual practices of the women interviewed here. Alternative sexualities and sexual practices, while technically available, are less appealing or socially legitimate than the conventional ones that participants are living.

Conclusion
The findings detailed in this paper suggest that the sexual relationships of the women interviewed continue to be conducted within a dominant heteronormative framework, contrary to claims about the democratisation or queering of sexual relations (Giddens 1992; Roseneil 2000). The privileging of marriage and long-term partnerships as the ultimate marker of success for women (Reynolds and Wetherall 2003; Sandfield and Percy 2003), means that they are often willing to relinquish sexual satisfaction in order to achieve this. Pragmatism (Duncan, 2011) underpins participants’ accounts, with their reported sexual practices reflecting conventional ideals rather than late modern fluidity. The popular emphasis placed on a satisfying sex life as the crux of a couple relationship is not evidenced here, as although participants stressed sexual compatibility as a deciding factor in initiating a relationship, once established satisfaction becomes less significant. The exception to this is where sexual activity had ceased in a relationship, a development regarded as irretrievable and a cause of marital breakdown for one participant. However, while satisfaction and desire were less critical, sex was regarded as an
important arena for developing intimacy and closeness within a relationship.

Essentialist understandings of masculinity and femininity undermine equality and intimacy within participants’ relationships, with shifts in the outward forms of heterosexuality having a limited impact upon everyday heterosexual practice (Hawkes 1996). In this context, celebrations of the detraditionalisation of sexuality are premature, with my analysis affirming that further change is required before heterosexual women are truly seen as active and equal participants in their own sexual lives. This finding supports other feminist critiques of heterosexuality as retaining a deep-seated connection with patriarchal sexual relations and continuing to be privileged as the norm (Richardson and Monro 2012: 17). Yet, while participants were keen to conform to abstract notions of what a ‘normal’ sexual relationship might look like, they typically viewed their sexual practices and desires as intensely personal. With sexual life regarded as beyond the realm of the social, attention and effort is focussed upon individual relationships rather than the structures that constrain and limit them (Jackson 1993: 202).

Heterosexuality is not a fixed entity, and there is evidence of the ‘mutual recognition’ (Hollway 1996: 105) in which men and women are able to enjoy sex as equals, however I have argued that combined with these changes are continuities related to normative gender roles. Entrenched ideas about the dominance of the male sex drive and heterosexual sex as ‘the mature and normal form of sex’ (Rahman and Jackson 2010: 29) exert a strong influence over participants’ accounts. While the practices encompassed within heterosexual relationships range far beyond the sexual (Jackson 1996), sexuality remains a primary
element of female oppression. Individualisation theorists do not always consider the investments that men and women have with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, which undermine late modern notions of reflexivity (McNay 1999) within their sexual practices.

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