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### **Abstract**

The ubiquity of sexual images and references in western society suggests a hitherto unforeseen level of sexual liberation. Female sexual pleasure has become a particular focus (Giddens 1992), yet heterosexual women have become the 'invisible group' (Montemurro 2014:69) in sex research, neglected because of their perceived predictability. A rewarding sex life has become defined as the central dynamic of the late modern pair relationship, and the ideal often promoted in therapeutic literature suggests that for couples emotional closeness should be accompanied by emotional desire (Perel, 2007). However, when women in heterosexual relationships were questioned on their sexual practices, a privileging of male sexual pleasure was apparent. Analysis suggests that participants' sexual desires and expectations are undermined by essentialist understandings of masculinity and femininity, as shifts in the outward forms of heterosexuality have done little to challenge sexual practices which continue to be entrenched in heteronormative ideals.

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

### **Introduction**

This paper reports on two qualitative research projects exploring the sexual and intimate lives of a number of women in long-term heterosexual relationships (either cohabiting or married) in order to interrogate the ways that they negotiated their everyday sexual practices, expectations and desires in the context of societal pressure for individuals and particularly couples to demonstrate their sexual proficiency. The findings presented here suggest that once in long-term heterosexual relationships, the participants begin conforming to traditionally gendered roles at the expense of the sexual experimentation and satisfaction that they may have previously enjoyed. However, this was not out of lack of choice, but often out of a sense of pragmatism (Duncan 2011), as the women interviewed represented the demographic characteristics that would allow them to capitalise on the posited late modern transformations in sexual practices and personal relationships. 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 shaping the ways the participants' experienced and understood their relationships.

### **The Liberalisation of (Hetero)Sexuality?**

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 discussion over the extent to which intimate relationships have been transformed has focussed in particular on accompanying changes in sexual identities and practices. Individualisation theorists such as Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995, 2002) have recorded increasing fluidity and choice in contemporary sexual life. The result is a predominance of 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1992: 178), in which sex is severed from reproduction and functions as a 'malleable feature of self' (Giddens, 1992: 15). Manifestations of this 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 sexual and gender order.

Yet arguments about the extent that 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, the assumption that female sexual pleasure is regarded as important as male is also challenged by empirical evidence. Young people's accounts of non-coital sexual practices (Lewis, Marston and Wellings 2013) are framed in terms of preparation for vaginal intercourse, rather than of having any value in themselves. Similarly, Holland et al's (1998) 'male in the head' usefully characterised 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's.

### Older women

Popular culture generally celebrates sex as 'good for you' (Jamison 1998: 107) and special, and the linking of sex, love and intimacy constructs the sex enjoyed by committed couples as superior. A rewarding sex life is a crucial component of Giddens' 'pure' relationship (1992), which represents a democratised, detraditionalised intimacy in which female sexual pleasure is as regarded as important as male. 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). 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 and the popularity of female-targeted erotica such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James 2011), a prioritising of female sexual pleasure appears to have become a more common cultural theme. The research presented here seeks to explore a number of these claims about changes in sexual mores and the queering of sexual practices (Roseneil, 2000) when applied to women's experiences of heterosexual relations.

Recent research and scholarship has done much to rectify this, although a focus on subversive and diverse sexual practices means that we still know little about 'everyday, mundane, conventional sexual lives' (Jackson 2008: 34) particularly within heterosexual relationships. This paper focuses on 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). Against this backdrop, the research presented here aims to contribute to an endeavour to cast light on 'ordinary sex' (Jackson 2008) and explores the way that women negotiate issues of desire and expectations in their sexual practices in long-term relationships.

## **Method**

The data analysed here comes from a larger project researching generational change in heterosexual couple relationships ( ----) and more recent research specifically exploring the sexual and intimate lives of a small number of women

in long-term heterosexual relationships. The interview transcripts from the earlier study were revisited and data-mined for relevant references and discussions. As the more recent research focused almost entirely on sexual practices there tended to be a larger quantity of relevant data. A thematic analysis was employed to code interview transcripts 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.

The paper draws on twelve qualitative interviews conducted with women aged between 20-35 from the former study and the seven interviews conducted with women aged between 26-38 in the latter [overall mean age 33]. All of the participants are educated to at least degree level or equivalent and are employed in professional occupations, meaning that they have 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 research into sexual practices is often problematic (O'Connell Davidson and Layder 1994) and the research presented here proved no exception. Participants were sampled using convenience and snowball sampling methods, which was 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).

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 private details of their sexual practices, 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 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 relationship. 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 expression and constructions of desire and expectations, as the following section addresses.

#### **Early expectations and pre-relationship sexual practices:**

For the participants in this research, sex [understood here to refer to coitus] is universally constructed as an integral part of a couple relationship, to the extent that lack of sex is viewed as abnormal or deviant. When recounting the commencement of their current relationships, participants stressed the importance of sexual compatibility as a deciding factor in entering a relationship, 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' sexual practices within heterosexual relationships contrasted in many cases with the way they behaved when single, 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 no longer viewed in a negative light for women.

The suggestion that young, single and 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 negative consequences for women who fail to properly police their own sexual behaviour according to societal norms. Zoe explains, '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 one participant is initially enthusiastic about the casual sexual she enjoyed when single, she recounts a negative experience in her first year as an undergraduate university 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 'too' 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 indicative of a shift in heteronormative discourse away from conventional relationship forms. 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 met 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 message that finding a partner for a long-term relationship should be the ultimate goal for heterosexuals.

While for young single women sexual activity appears to have been liberalised to a certain extent, for these participants a stage of promiscuity and experimentation is time-limited as monogamy and a long-term heterosexual relationship become their priority. Yet from the ways in which the women talk about the start of their relationships it is apparent that sex was important 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 interrogates how the 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'**

The focus here is on sexual practices in long-term heterosexual relationships, particularly once the 'inevitable loss of passion' (Perel 2007: 4) sets in, and how the women interviewed negotiate this in their everyday lives and justify remaining in relationships which may not be sexually satisfying, particularly in relation to their earlier expectations. A number of the participants 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 extracts 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 can be seen as a positive, the proliferation of methodologically dubious figures in the tabloid media contribute to heteronormative depictions of what it means to be a 'normal' couple. The production of statistics on sexual behaviour is particularly problematic (Gabb 2010:34), yet it is apparent that they are often treated as incontrovertible 'facts' by which individuals and couples can and should measure themselves. The participants here are reflexive to the extent that they compare their own

experiences to what they perceive to be the norm, however this reflexivity has little to do with individual choice and freedoms.

A robust sex life is taken to be indicative of a healthy relationship by several of the respondents, 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 respondents' 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 illustrated by the phrase 'making love' (Jamieson 1998: 106), and for participants here sexual practices are understood as a key site of 'doing' intimacy. A lack of sexual frequency in their relationships was viewed 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 house-mates as husband and wife, I don't really see the point, you stop being emotionally close when that happens.' (Amita)

Amita's description of what has become a celibate 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 need to conform to a contemporary ideal does not represent freedom from repression, rather it alludes to different pressures, particularly as women often bear the responsibility for maintaining the emotional 'health' of a relationship (Duncombe and Marsden 1993), as '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. Sexual practice here is discussed by participants less in terms of agency and desire than as part of the labour of a relationship. For many of the participants there appears 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'. 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' 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 forms of pleasure. While this may be representative of the experiences of some of the participants interviewed, for others the lack of a regular or rewarding sex life had become a source of misery and tension within their relationships.

### **Gendered Desires:**

While every participant reported that they generally enjoyed gender equality in their relationships, heteronormative constructions of highly differentiated male and female sexual needs were often utilised 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 important in shaping the ways that participants talk about their sexual desires and practices, relying on a biological view of women as naturally passive and men as sexually aggressive. Interviewees frequently referenced their partners wanting more sex; Teresa's comment was typical; 'Men are always up for sex, aren't they?' and as the difference was put down to 'a basic biological mismatch between men and women' by Annie. This discourse 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 something that men 'do' to women rather than an experience based on reciprocal pleasure. Sex, when discussed in relation to being part of a couple is defined almost exclusively in terms of penetrative intercourse (Jamieson, 1998), and the point of sexual encounters is meeting men's needs and desires (Holland *et al* 1998). For a number of the participants being sexually available is part of being in a relationship. Helen describes sex in her long-term relationship as 'like a chore' and Chloe explains how sex in 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 express 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, some of the women interviewed described the pressure they felt to appear sexually desirable to their partners. In this extract, Kate describes negotiating the various pressure placed on her body in terms of appearance and sexual practices placed on her partner and her discomfort with this:

'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, however they also have the agency to resist as can be evidenced by Kate's rejection of her partner's advances. Keeping ones' partner sexually satisfied is understood to be part of a woman's duty, as the participants not only provide their partners with sex but also anticipate their 'needs', which are 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 sexual 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 phallogentric framework in my participants' definitions at least. In their extensive study of heterosexual relationships, Duncombe and Marsden (1993) found that women's emotional work extended to the bedroom, as their female respondents reported faking desire and agreeing to unwanted sex, in common with many of the participants in this research.

The dominance of the male sex drive discourse in the respondents' understandings of gender relations meant that for the women interviewed who were dissatisfied with sexual frequency in their relationships, articulating their desires was particularly problematic. As desire is usually positioned as masculine, it is at odds with femininity and remains problematic for women to openly express (Tolman 2005). Respondents may rationalise the mis-match between their own and their partners' sex 'drives' through excusing their partners, as Laura does; '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 blame themselves as illustrated in Ali and Amitas' 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 express dissatisfaction about the frequency of intercourse in their relationships, they tend to see this as a result of external factors (for example their partner being tired from work), or blame themselves for not being sexually desirable enough. Similar research conducted in a US based study (Wyse, Smock and Manning 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 respondents to draw on, explaining their experiences becomes 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 recognise their sexual desires as important and will initiate 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 tend to pick fault with their relationship or themselves. As Tolman (2005) suggests, women learn to conceal their sexual desires while continuing to appear sexually available in order to appeal to male sexual desire.

For the respondents here, male sexual pleasure takes precedence in long-term relationships, partly because sex is understood to be something that women provide men with, and partly because female desire is limited by heteronormative frameworks, which do not provide women with the language to openly, express their experiences or desires. For example, I asked participants about masturbation, a question which was received with awkwardness, evasiveness and giggling. There persists what Tolman and Szalacha (1999) term a 'missing discourse of desire' concerning 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 in other research (Lewis, Marston, and Wellings 2013), the purpose of non-coital stimulation of women is 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 defining their own needs as synonymous as men's, leading to a privileging of male sexual pleasure within heterosexual relationship.

The participants of this research are in possession of the requisite cultural and economic capital to reject unsatisfactory sexual relationships if they so wish and



seek alternative partnerships. The suggestion appeared to be that the status that accompanies marriage or cohabitation for women was worth the sexual labour of a relationship. Zoe explains 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 reconciles 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 is viewed very much 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 reports 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.

Belief in the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality, with particular reference to 'natural' biological drives allowing oppressive beliefs and practices to persist alongside more contemporary ideas about sexuality (Hockey, Robinson and Meah 2002) and undermining emphases on female pleasure. There is little evidence here to support Giddens' (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.

## **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 democratization 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 sacrifice sexual satisfaction in order to achieve this. Pragmatism (Duncan, 2011) underpins participants' accounts, with sexual experimentation and promiscuity regarded as a youthful indulgence, or something that should be carefully concealed in terms of infidelity.

Intimacy and equality within participants' relationships is undermined by essentialist understandings of masculinity and femininity, as shifts in the outward forms of heterosexuality have done little to change heterosexual practice (Hawkes 1996). Heterosexuality retains a deep-seated connection with patriarchal sexual relations and continues to be privileged as the norm (Richardson and Monro 2012: 17). Yet participants view their sexual practices and desires as intensely private and beyond the realm of the social, meaning that attention is focussed upon individual relationships, rather than the structures that constrain and limit them (Jackson 1993: 202).

Heterosexuality may not be a fixed entity, and there is also evidence of the 'mutual recognition' described by Hollway (1996: 105) which allows men and women to enjoy sex as equals, however the contention of this paper is 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 the respondents' accounts. While heterosex may not be the primary element of female oppression (Smart 1996), the practices encompassed within heterosexual relationships range far beyond the sexual (Jackson 1996). The authors of detraditionalised sexualities 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) in their sexual practices.

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