



**Therapists' and non-therapists' constructions of heterosex:**

**A comparative story completion study**

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### Abstract

This thesis explores the discourses underpinning therapists' and non-therapists' constructions of sexual experimentation and masturbation in heterosexual relationships. A constructionist thematic analysis of 200 story completions written by 58 therapists and 53 non-therapists showed that discursive imperatives to *do* 'normal' gender coalesce in participants' accounts of heterosex to perpetuate prescriptive notions of sexual practice, produce unequal gendered relationships and generate different obligations and entitlements for women and men. Whilst both therapists and non-therapists drew on the same problematic heteronormative discourses to construct masturbation and sexual experimentation, the 'difficulties' that these caused in relationships were generally framed by therapists as opportunities for personal growth and for increasing emotional depth within relationships. It is suggested that therapists' understanding of relationships and intimacy may be informed by their therapeutic training and their overreliance on narrow and restrictive discourses of heterosex may point towards a gap in critical training in sexual issues. The findings are situated within a wider discussion of counselling psychology's role in addressing heteronormativity in psychological practice. It is argued that counselling psychology's origins as an alternative to mainstream approaches and its stated aim of pursuing a wider social justice agenda positions it as a potential bridge between critical approaches and applied psychology. This research concludes that fostering a critical stance in counselling psychologists will not only allow the social justice agenda of the discipline to be met more consistently but could also support a more coherent and consistent professional identity. **Key words:** Counselling Psychology, coital imperative, heteronormativity, masturbation, sex therapy, sexual experimentation, thematic analysis, therapeutic training.

## Overview

Sex continues to cause widespread anxiety in people (Mitchell, Mercer, Ploubidis, Jones, Datta, et al. 2013). However, due to gaps in professional training on sexual issues, many therapists feel largely unprepared to address clients' anxiety about sex (Baker, 1990; Bruni, 1974; Hill, 2013; Miller & Byers, 2008, 2011; Moon, 2008, 2009, 2011; Pukal, 2009; Yarris & Allegeier, 1988). In this introduction I argue, that whilst there is a growing body of work in counselling psychology addressing the needs of LGBT clients (e.g. Hicks & Milton, 2010; Hicks, 2010; Milton, Coyle & Legg, 2002; Moon, 2010; Roughley & Morrison, 2013; Smith, Shin & Officer, 2012; Spinelli, 1997), heterosexuality continues to be overlooked in training and research agendas. I argue that heterosexuality needs to form part of a general discussion of sexualities, particularly if a wider anti-discriminatory agenda is to be served (Hockey, Meah & Robinson, 2007). I go on to summarize the main ways heterosexuality has been conceptualised in counselling psychology, both in Britain and in the United States and argue that essentialist positions dominate in current research. I relay the pitfall in adopting essentialist assumptions about heterosexuality and examine the particular barriers in British and American schools of counselling psychology to introducing critical and feminist conceptualisations of sexuality. In the absence of critically informed training, therapists may rely on mainstream conceptualisations of (hetero)sex and therefore unwittingly perpetuate problematic and oppressive notions of (hetero)sexuality and gender (Barker, 2011a; Denman, 2004; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2001, 2008, 2012). I argue that this is a particular issue for counselling psychologists whose professional practice guidelines explicitly expect them to serve a wider social justice agenda (Milton, 2014; Moon, 2011; Pugh & Coyle, 2000; Strawbridge, 2002).

Within mental health settings, psychologists are increasingly placed in leadership positions and looked towards for models of best practice (Onyett, 2007). I point out that one of the competencies that continues to be valued in clinical leadership is the ability to offer alternatives to mainstream treatment based on the medical model (Onyett, 2007). However training courses continue to fail to adequately foster criticality in trainees (Johnson, 2001; Moon, 2011; Onyett, 2007). I go on to argue that counselling psychology's origin as an alternative to mainstream psychology positions it well placed to incorporate social constructionist thinking into the field's existing clinical repertoire (Milton, 2010).

This research offers feminist, social constructionist scholarship as an alternative to essentialist conceptualisations of (hetero) sex and sexuality. One of the aims of this research is to highlight the need for training in critical approaches to (hetero)sexuality by exploring to what extent therapists are as locked into heteronormative understandings of sex, sexual identities and sexual practices as people who have not been therapeutically trained. In the absence of access to critical frameworks, therapists will likely draw on heteronormative understandings of sex that are 'at best, limiting and constraining and, at worst, dehumanising and risks exacerbating rather than alleviating suffering' (Barker, 2011b, p. 35). Furthermore, I explore the potential of social constructionism as theoretical framework (Burr, 2003) for counselling psychology research and practice and argue that access to critical positions will offer counselling psychologists a more coherent professional identity and greater opportunity to meet the expectations of the professional guidelines. A firm base in critical traditions will also allow counselling psychologists to assume leadership on social justice agendas more broadly and allow important bridges to be built between critical and applied psychology.

## Introduction

Western culture has been described as sex-saturated (Attwood, 2006, 2009; Gill, 2007, 2012). Sexualised imagery in advertising and popular media is commonplace (Gill, 2007, 2009; Gill & Sharff, 2011). Pornography has become readily available on the internet (Attwood, 2006; Mulholland, 2015) and previously marginalised sexual practices such as Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism (BDSM) are more visible in the public domain (Barker, 2013a; Barrett, 2007; Martin, 2013; Weiss, 2006). Moreover 'sexual products and services are becoming increasingly accessible and the development of communication technologies to support, replace or reconfigure sexual encounters are increasingly part of ordinary people's everyday lives' (Attwood, 2006, p. 82). The overwhelming message is that 'everyone is always ready, willing and able to have sex' (Miracle, Miracle, & Baumeister, 2002, p. 101).

Alongside an increasingly pornographic mainstream media, people are more and more concerned about what constitutes 'normal' sexual functioning and driven to seek pharmaceutical and surgical interventions to improve sexual performance (Angel, 2012; Barker, 2011b; Kaschak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2001, 2003, 2008, 2012). However, despite a sharp increase in range and availability of medical treatments, anxiety about sex has not shifted over the last two decades (Angel, 2012; Moran & Lee, 2013; Pronier & Monk-Turnera, 2014; Tiefer, 2012). Sexual difficulties remain common; the most recent British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL-3) reported anxiety related difficulties during intercourse in 42% of men and 51% of women (Mitchell, Mercer, Ploubidis, Jones, Datta, et al., 2013). The National Health Service (NHS) in Britain attempted

to address people's anxiety about sex, by launching a major media campaign entitled, 'Sex worth talking about' (NHS, 2009) designed to encourage Britons to bring sexual difficulties to their treating clinician. Although the campaign was primarily aimed at health professionals, it opened up a dialogue among psychological therapists about whether training adequately equips them to have conversations about sex, and which frameworks their work should draw on (Hill, 2013; Moon, 2011; Pukall, 2009).

Training on sexual issues offered to UK psychologists on doctoral training programmes is argued to be insufficient, an issue which has been consistently highlighted since the 1970s, yet remains unresolved (Asher, 2008; Baker, 1990; Bruni, 1974; Hill, 2013; Miller & Byers, 2008, 2011; Moon, 2008, 2009, 2011; Pukal, 2009; Yarris & Allegeier, 1988). Indeed, of the fourteen counselling psychology courses accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS), very few include modules focusing specifically on sexuality (Hill, 2013 [see <http://www.bps.org.uk> for a full list of courses and links to the modules]). Teaching allocated to sexual issues has been noted to be between 2-16 hours over the course of a 5 to 7 year training programme (Moon, 2009).

The reluctance to put sex on training agendas for therapists has been regarded as an expression of cultural shame around sexual issues that mutes frank discussion about sex in public arenas (Hill, 2013, Pukall, 2009). Similarly, clients who disclose sexual difficulties to therapists are often told that their difficulties cannot be addressed as part of their psychological treatment and are subsequently referred on to specialist services (Barker, 2011a; Pukall, 2009). This suggests that therapeutic decisions may be primarily informed by therapist's discomfort with client sexual material.

### **Therapists' Discomfort with Sexual Material in Therapy**

A survey about client non-disclosure in therapy generally, reported that 38% of people had not shared sexual problems with their therapist (Hook & Andrews, 2005). Similarly, Baker (1990) found that 28% of therapy clients reported symptoms of distress about sexual functioning in addition to their presenting problem; a further 30% reported sexual dissatisfaction. This suggests that the degree to which clients disclose sexual concerns in therapy understates their actual levels of distress about sex.

In her article, 'No sex please, we are counsellors!' Clarkson (2003) identified a general reluctance amongst therapists to talk about sexual material. Hill (2013) argued that clients' willingness to disclose is influenced by a therapist's ability to invite disclosure. Clients 'test' their therapists' ability to hear sexual concerns by discussing related topics, such as intimacy, and therapists communicate their anxiety about sexual material by failing to recognise, and respond positively to, invitations to probe further (Hill, 2013). This inability to respond to clients' cues communicates that sexual concerns are not appropriate for therapy (Hill, 2013; Hill, Thompson, Cogar & Denman, 1993; Miller & Byers, 2008, 2011). Miller and Byers (2008, 2011) found that therapists' ability to respond to sexual concerns related not only to their confidence as practitioners but also to their political views. They found that trainee therapists' discomfort with sexual matters correlated with high scores on conservatism as measured by the 10-item sexual conservatism scale (Burt, 1980). This suggests that therapists' personal experiences, as well as their political and cultural views, bear heavily on the scope for therapy when it comes to working with sexual material.

In her classic exploration of the permeable boundary between the consulting room and the wider culture, Hare-Mustin (1994) introduced the concept of a 'mirrored' (therapy) room to illustrate how the same discourses that govern the outside world determine what happens in therapy. Therapists are not immune to cultural and political influence and therapeutic approaches are equally influenced by the underlying ideology of the culture in which they develop. As Hadjiosif (2015) points out: 'therapy does not take place in a moral vacuum' (p. 310), and without a rigorous interrogation of the belief systems that a particular therapeutic approach draws upon, therapists may become unwitting perpetrators of such beliefs. Therapist discomfort is thus invariably shaped by their underlying assumptions about sex, and such assumptions will in turn influence their therapeutic interaction with clients. The next section will examine the main ways sex and sexuality has been conceptualised within counselling psychology.

### **The Conceptualisation of Sex and Sexuality in Counselling Psychology**

The conceptualisation of sex in counselling psychology has been predominantly essentialist (Milton, 2010). Essentialism endorses the view that there are underlying true forms or essences in social 'categories' such as (gender, sexuality and race etc.) and that social categories are separate rather than fluid, as well as constant over time (The Oxford Online Dictionary, 2010). The underlying essence within sexuality is assumed to be natural, inevitable, and biologically determined. By contrast socially critical models, such as social constructionism (Burr, 2003), rest on the belief that such assumed 'truths' about sexuality are socially constructed and emphasize the importance of understanding how positions of power are implicitly perpetuated in certain ways of constructing sexuality (Foucault, 2003). While

the conceptualisation of sex in counselling psychology has been essentialist on both sides of the Atlantic, British counselling psychology is arguably better equipped to incorporate a social constructionist (Burr, 2003) approaches to sex and sexuality.

In comparing the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Handbook in Counseling Psychology* (Subich, Carter, Fouad, 2012) to the *British Handbook of Counselling Psychology* (Woolfe, Strawbridge, Douglas & Dryden, 2010), one difference is strikingly obvious: each chapter in the British handbook presents relevant research in relation to counselling psychology's core values around social justice, as set out in the professional practice guidelines of the profession, which expects its members:

‘to recognise social contexts and discrimination and to work always in ways that empower rather than control and also demonstrate the high standards of anti-discriminatory practice appropriate to the pluralistic nature of society today’ (p. 2) and ‘to consider at all times their responsibilities to the wider world’ (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2005, p, 7).

In the APA counterpart, on the other hand, the research findings in particular topic areas are presented without a wider discussion of how they may fit within the overall values of counselling psychology. Counselling psychology in the US follows a scientist-practitioner<sup>1</sup> model, which unlike the reflective-practitioner<sup>2</sup> model in Britain (Schön, 1987), fails to place the same importance on reflexivity<sup>3</sup> (Flanagan, 1981). Because British and American

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<sup>1</sup> The scientist-practitioner model sets out that clinical practice should be principally guided by empirical research and that models of best practice involve striving towards a loop between empirical research and applied practice, where one influences the other. (Baker, Benjamin, Ludy; 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The reflective-practitioner model sets out that clinical practice should be principally guided by personal reflection and models of best practice suggest that personal reflection and applied practice inform each other (Schön, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Reflexivity is the corner stone of the reflective-practitioner model, which describes the loop between personal reflection on unconscious motivation and clinical or research practice. (Flanagan, 1981)

counselling psychology practice is underpinned by such contrasting stand points it seems appropriate to distinguish between the respective bodies of research that have arisen from the respective fields of counselling psychology in order to examine the ways sexuality has been conceptualised by each. Neither British nor American counselling psychology has been guided by socially critical approaches, such as social constructionism (Burr, 2003) and thereby fail to adequately address issues of oppression inherent in social systems. Thus both models' attempt to meet a wider social justice agenda runs the risk of being tokenistic. I will demonstrate the respective pitfalls of each model in turn starting with a more detailed discussion of the chapters on heterosexuality in the respective *Handbooks* and go on to reflect on wider counselling psychology literature on heterosex and ultimately argue for the importance of adopting social constructionist ways of conceptualising sex and sexuality.

In the US, the APA *Handbook of Counselling Psychology* (Fouad et al., 2012) contains a chapter on 'Sexism and Heterosexism' (Szymanski & Moffitt, 2012), which exemplifies how research with an overt social justice agenda can in fact inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal ideology due to its failure to sufficiently interrogate implicit underlying assumptions. The main focus of Szymanski and Moffitt's (2012) chapter is the detrimental effect of sexism and heterosexism on people's mental health. While this is an issue that serves a social justice agenda, the research that Szymanski and Moffitt (2012) cited locates responsibility for adverse mental health outcomes in those who are at the receiving end of sexism and heterosexism, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging oppressive social structures. For example, Szymanski and Moffitt (2012) cited Zucker and Landry's (2007) study, which linked women's binge drinking and smoking to a higher incidence of, what is referred to in the

chapter as 'unwanted sexist events' (p. 361). While Zucker and Landry (2007) inadvertently argue that women who binge drink and smoke are to blame for subsequent 'unwanted sexual events'. Furthermore, Szymanski and Moffitt (2012) cited Corning's (2002) work on perceived gender inequity and depression and Moradi and Subich's (2004) work on psychological distress and 'sexist events' to argue that the relationship between sexism and 'psychological distress was [only] positive for women with low self-esteem but not significant for those with high self-esteem' (p. 368), indicating that sexism has no impact on women who are psychologically resilient. The limitation of this kind of research is that, although well-meaning, Szymanski and Moffitt (2012) ultimately argue that people make themselves vulnerable through their behaviour or psychology (e.g. binge drinking, smoking, low self-esteem etc.), implying that the onus to tackle oppression is on the oppressed not on the oppressors. The therapist's task is thus to equip people who are oppressed with greater resilience to bear oppression and thereby invariably accept oppression as parts of normative society. The implicit perpetuation of oppression can be observed in the wider US counselling psychology literature around women's sexual desire.

A recent study that focused on women's low sexual desire, headed up by a leading US counselling psychologist on women's sexual issues, Laurie B. Mintz, took an essentialist view<sup>4</sup> of women's sexuality (Mintz, Balzer, Zhao & Bush, 2012). The authors defined 'low sexual desire' as a biological event, without locating it culturally and politically, or engaging with the extensive body of feminist research that has consistently highlighted the importance of developing a social understanding of sex to alleviate psychological distress (e.g. Working

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<sup>4</sup> Essentialism is the view that certain categories (e.g. gender, sexual orientation) have an underlying reality or core essence that distinguishes one category from another (e.g. all women like romance and all men like sex).

Group of the New View Campaign, 2004). In their discussion of female desire, Mintz et al. (2012) drew on Basson's (2000, 2002, 2005) receptivity principle, which is defined as the 'willingness to proceed [with sexual activity] despite the absence of sexual desire at that instant' (p. 294). Basson (2005) argued that physical arousal precedes conscious desire in women and found that, in the absence of sexual desire, many women agree to sex to 'placate a partner' (p. 46). Rather than regarding such motivations as potentially promoting coercive sex and reinforce male sexual demands (Tyler, 2009), she argued that they are only seemingly unhealthy: 'When the experience proves rewarding for the woman such that part way through she herself starts to feel that she too would not wish to stop, it becomes unclear whether the original reasons (to placate) are truly unhealthy' (Basson, 2005, p. 46). Despite the potential of Basson's (2000, 2002, 2005) research to endorse coercive sex, it has been integrated into the revisions of the diagnostic criteria for sexual dysfunction in the latest version of the DSM (DSM-5, 2013). Basson's concept of receptivity essentially revives the 'sleeping beauty' theory of women's sexuality, which informed 19th century theorists like Theodore van de Velde who endorsed an assumption of female sexual dependency on men by arguing that women's sexuality had to be 'awakened' by men (van de Velde cited in Everaerd & Booth, 2001: 137). The concept of receptivity inhibits women's sexual autonomy (Jackson, 1984), undermines women's ability to refuse unwanted sexual contact and promotes harmful rape myths (Tyler, 2009). This demonstrates that counselling psychology research on sexuality with a social justice agenda – such as aiming to 'improve' women's lives (e.g. Basson, 2000, 2002, 2005; Corning, 2002; Mintz et al. 2012; Moradi & Subich, 2004; Szymanski & Moffitt, 2012; Zucker & Landry, 2007) can be counterproductive if the assumptions that underpin the research are not rooted in a critical framework. While

counselling psychology in the US may produce a higher volume of research that seeks to explore issues around sex and sexuality, it is questionable to what extent scientist-practitioner research is equipped to drive a social justice agenda.

In the UK, a distinctive counselling psychology perspective on ‘ordinary’<sup>5</sup> heterosexual experience is notably absent; for example, the chapter on sexuality (Hicks & Milton, 2010) in the most recent *British Handbook of Counselling Psychology* (Woolfe, Strawbridge, Douglas & Dryden, 2010) focuses on non-heterosexual experience exclusively. Wider research that discusses sex and sexuality has primarily focused on therapeutic practice issues in two separate areas: sexual abuse and trauma (e.g. Saha, Cheung & Thorne 2011; Vilenica, Shakespeare-Finch & Obst, 2013; Yarrow & Churchill, 2010) and LGBT people’s experiences of therapy (e.g., Hicks & Milton, 2010; Hicks, 2010; Milton, Coyle & Legg, 2002; Moon, 2010; Roughley & Morrison, 2013; Smith, Shin & Officer, 2012; Spinelli, 1997). The theoretical approaches that underpin the different areas are distinct and are therefore discussed in turn.

The literature on sexual abuse and trauma predominantly consists of small scale case studies and places first person subjectivity at the centre of enquiry by using, primarily, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand people’s experiences. For example, Saha et al. (2011) and Vilenica et al. (2013) both examined the shifting sense of self in people with experience of childhood sexual abuse (CSA). Both studies drew on an essentialist framework to present a ‘sense of self’ as an unchangeable ‘essence’ that resides within people independent of their social and cultural environment and constructed CSA as

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<sup>5</sup>Ordinary is put into quotation marks to connote my critical understanding that ‘ordinary’ is a value laden term that privileges particular experiences by suggesting they are the same for all people and therefore promotes problematic concepts of normativity.

disturbing 'normal' development. While CSA is indisputably a profoundly traumatic and devastating event, by failing to attend to the social and cultural forces that contribute to the distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' development, the authors unwittingly pathologise people's response to a trauma. The adverse psychological effects of stigmatisation following trauma as a result of being perceived, and perceiving oneself, as irreparably damaged, have been consistently pointed out by critical scholars (e.g. Lamb 1996; Picart 2003, Tindall, Robinson & Kagan, 2010). If therapeutic work with people recovering from abuse is to serve an emancipatory agenda, unequal distributions of power in patriarchal societal structures that scaffold sexual victimisation need to be acknowledged, both inside and outside of the therapy room (Gavey, 2005; Tindall, Robinson & Kagan, 2010). Furthermore, by locating traumatic events in individual experience and failing to examine the social, cultural, historical and political dimensions of trauma, research is unable to speak to a wider social justice agenda and thus misses opportunities to examine oppressive social structures (Gavey, 2005; Picart 2003, Tindall, Robinson & Kagan, 2010).

Counselling psychological scholarship that takes a more critical view of sexuality has only developed in the context of LGBT research (e.g., Hicks & Milton, 2010; Hicks, 2010; Milton, Coyle & Legg, 2002; Moon, 2010; Roughley & Morrison, 2013; Smith, Shin & Officer, 2012; Spinelli, 1997). The predominant premise of this research is that counselling psychologists need to offer viable alternatives to oppressive cultural discourses around sexuality for therapy to be meaningful. For example, Hicks and Milton (2010) proposed a more fluid model of sexuality (e.g. that sexuality and gender exist on a continuum rather than

in distinct categories) and stressed the importance for counselling psychologists to pioneer non-oppressive, affirmative therapeutic practice and reject essentialist frameworks.

While many of the challenges and considerations brought forward by the critical enquiry into LGBT experiences of therapy are applicable to all sexualities, the notable lack of a specific discussion of heterosexuality needs to be addressed, particularly if a wider anti-discriminatory agenda is to be served; heterosexuality must become part of a broader dialogue about all sexualities (Hockey, Meah & Robinson, 2007). The absence of heterosexuality in discussions of sexuality in counselling psychology perpetuates the notion of heterosexuality as 'normative' and 'neutral' and locates 'difference' in 'other' sexualities that are examined on the basis of their relative distance from this perceived norm (Minnich, 2006). Only a discussion of all sexualities on equal footings can begin to break down the powerful mechanisms that reinforce and perpetuate problematic notions of hegemonic heteronormativity<sup>6</sup> (Dyer, 1997; Rich, 1980; Warner 1991).

In an attempt to address the absence of a critical discussion of heterosexuality within counselling psychology literature I argue that critical feminist and queer scholarship on heterosexuality provides the foundations for developing a critical counselling psychology perspective. In the next section of this introduction, I review the main themes in contributions by critical feminist, queer and social constructionist scholarship on heterosex to offer thus an alternative conceptualisation of sex and sexuality. If a social justice agenda is to be met in a meaningful way, the contributions of essentialist views of sex and sexuality in

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<sup>6</sup> Heteronormativity describes how social institutions and policies reinforce the presumption that people are heterosexual and that gender/sex are natural binaries. Heteronormative discourses are oppressive, stigmatizing and marginalizing of other forms of sexuality and gender, and make self-expression more difficult when that expression does not conform to dominant norms.

perpetuating oppression inside and outside of the therapy room need to be acknowledged. Counselling psychologists are expected to not just work non-oppressively with all clients who experience stigmatisation and prejudice, but also to consider the context in which stigmatisation and prejudice occur and, more importantly, to consider their own part in perpetuating oppressive practice (Hicks & Milton, 2010). The failure to challenge essentialist ideas about sexuality and locate the meaning of people's experiences within the wider social and cultural context has indeed been regarded as counterproductive for therapeutic outcomes (Maracek & Kravetz, 1998). Essentialist assumptions locate sexuality within people rather than understanding its meanings as constituted by social discourse (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). By failing to shift responsibility for social pressures back onto social environments the onus of alleviating clients' psychological distress about sexuality is thus inadvertently placed on clients themselves which potentially leads to an exacerbation of feelings of guilt and helplessness (Kleinplatz, 2012; Tiefer, 2008).

Social constructionist scholarship on heterosexuality has drawn attention to the ways in which problematic assumptions about 'truth' in social discourses of sex are perpetuated and highlighted the ways in which normative versions of sex create obligations for men and women (Braun, Gavey & Mcphilips, 2003; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Farvid, 2015; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013; Frith, 2013; Gavey, McPhillips & Braun, 1999; McPhillips, Braun & Gavey 2001; Potts, 2002). Clients' anxiety about sex is often intimately connected to sexual norms and counselling psychologists need to be aware of how heteronormative patriarchal ideology can constitute individual distress, in order to offer clients new ways of understanding themselves (Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2008, 2012). Awareness of how power is given

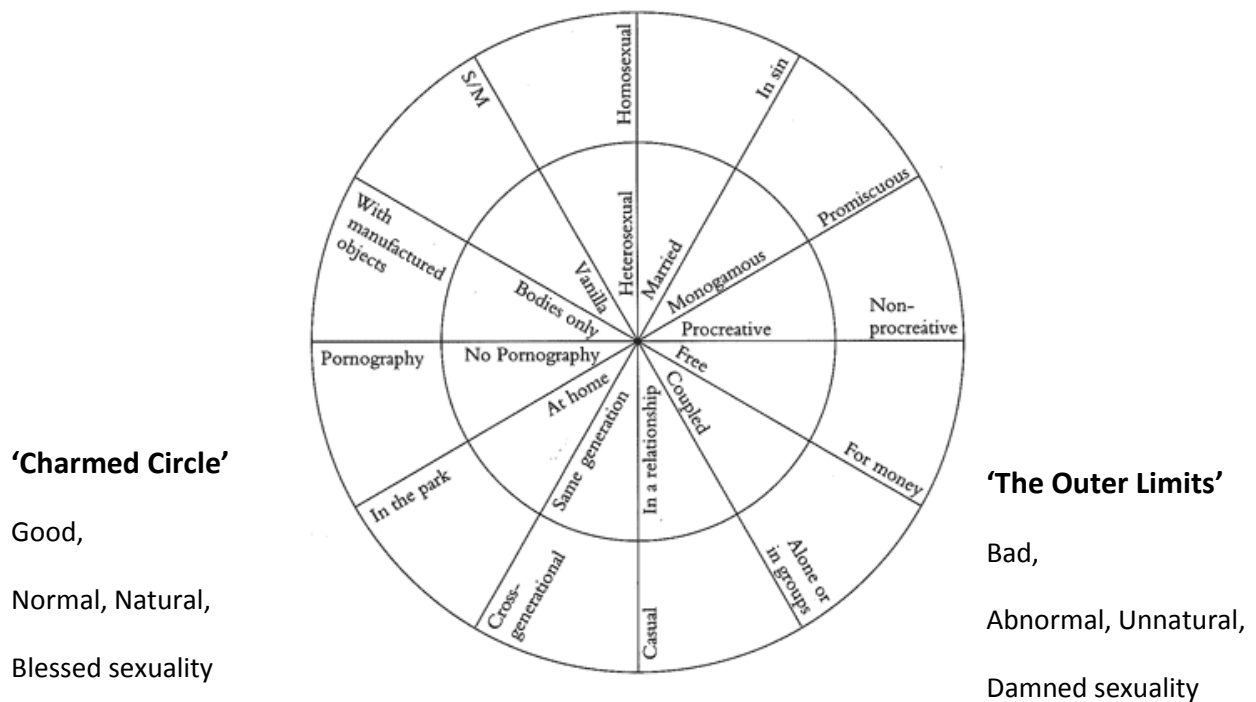
and taken away through social discourse is pivotal in safeguarding the therapeutic relationship from becoming a vehicle through which such social oppression is perpetuated (Hare-Mustin & Marececk, 1990; Hare-Mustin, 1994; Moon, 2011; Sinclair, 2007). I therefore turn to the feminist and social constructionist body of research to examine how social constructions of norms around sex and sexuality can regulate men and women's sexual encounters and constitute and exacerbate individual psychological distress about what it means to be normal.

### **The Social Construction of Heterosex**

In western culture the social construction of heterosex is implicitly governed by a hierarchical value system whereby certain sexual practices are privileged over others. Gayle Rubin (1984) termed this the 'charmed circle of sexuality'. While what is considered 'charmed' changes over time, people's desire to be charmed is ever-present. People perform their 'charmedness' by conforming to social norms of sexual practice. Social norms are pervasive and organise any aspect of sexuality and sexual practice (Kleinplatz, 2012; Rubin, 1984; Tiefer, 2008, 2012). The predominant normative sexual practice remains to be coitus (Gavey et al., 1999; Frith, 2013; Kleinplatz, 2012; McPhilips et al., 2001; Tiefer 2008). Gender role norms are underpinned by an implicit assumption for men to be active and women to be passive (Kleinplatz, 2012; McPhilips et al. 2001; Tiefer 2008), and men and women's sexual relationships are organised by an expectancy of reciprocity (Braun et al., 2003; Gilfoyle, Wilson & Brown, 1992). The coital imperative, the active/passive dichotomy and the reciprocity imperative are the pillars that uphold the 'charmed' circle of sexuality and reinforce heteronormativity. Forty years of feminist scholarship has attempted to understand

the social forces that perpetuate notions of 'charmed' heterosexual and the implications for women and, increasingly, men who engage in it. Counselling psychologists need to acknowledge this literature in order to respond to clients' distress about sex and acknowledge the inherent inequalities within prescribed gender roles, if social oppression is to be dismantled within the therapeutic encounter.

**The 'charmed' circle of sexuality.** In her 1984 landmark essay 'Thinking sex', Rubin examined the value system inherent in social understandings of sexual practice that results in some behaviours being defined as good/natural and others as bad/unnatural. She introduced the idea of the 'Charmed circle' of sexuality wherein privileged forms of sexuality reside and unprivileged forms occupy the 'outer limits'. The binaries of this 'charmed circle' include couple/alone, monogamous/promiscuous, same generation/cross-generational and bodies only/with manufactured objects etc. (see Figure 1). Rubin (1984) based her discussion on an assumption of a 'domino theory of sexual peril' (p. 150). She argued that society is compelled to draw a line between good and bad sex in order to demarcate sexual order from chaos. There is a fear, she argues, that if certain aspects of 'bad' sex are allowed to move across the line, unspeakable acts will move across as well. One of the most prevalent ideas about sex is that there is one proper way to do it and that society lacks a concept of benign sexual variation (Rubin, 1984).



**Figure 1: Gayle Rubin’s Charmed circle of sexuality** (Kind permission is granted by Duke University Press for non-exclusive World rights in the English language for inclusion in this Thesis for the University of the West of England.)

The demarcation between ‘charmed’ and ‘deviant’ forms of sex may seem outdated in, what Gill (2009) termed, a ‘sex saturated’ society characterised by the mainstreaming of BDSM (e.g. *Fifty Shades of Grey* book trilogy [James, 2011, 2012a, 2012b] and film [Taylor-Johnson, De Luca, Brunetti, James, 2015]), the proliferation of freely available casual sex through social networking websites (e.g. [www.gotinder.com](http://www.gotinder.com)) and easily accessible online pornography (Attwood, 2006) that promotes forms of sexual practice previously deemed ‘deviant’. Whilst deviant forms of sex may have moved into the charmed circle, the idea that there is both a ‘charmed’ way of having sex and a desire to be charmed persists. People’s anxieties about sexual practice are thus located within a culture of changing sexual norms where the goalpost of what constitutes ‘normal’ functioning continues to be moved and

people relentlessly make every effort to catch up with changing cultural expectations. One of the markers of 'normal' sexual functioning for heterosexuals remains to be coitus, engaging in coitus is therefore an important and necessary way of demonstrating ones charmedness.

**The coital imperative.** The term 'coital imperative' was originally coined by Jackson (1984) to describe how the social construction of coitus as a quintessential heterosexual practice, makes it inconceivable for a man and a woman to 'have sex' without engaging in coitus. Despite a wealth of feminist research drawing attention to ways in which coital imperative can enact women's oppression (Dworkin, 1987; Frith, 2013; Jeffreys, 1990; MacKinnon, 1987, McPhilip et al. 2001; Myerson, Crawley, Anstey, Kessler & Okopny, 2007), coitus continues to define heterosex (Gavey et al., 1999; Frith, 2013; Kleinplatz, 2012; McPhilips, Braun & Gavey 2001; Tiefer 2008).

Tiefer (2008) argued that coitus is constructed as a biological event to imply the universality and pre-social innateness, which 'accords intercourse an imperative status' (McPhilip et al., 2001, p. 40). People's 'desire to be "normal"' becomes a mechanism whereby the centrality of intercourse is reinscribed' (Gavey, et al., 1999, p. 44). The coital imperative rest on the premise that intercourse not only fundamentally defines sex, but that men are biologically driven to pursue it (Farvid, 2015; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013; Jackson, 1984). Consequently, heterosexual practice is predominantly organised by what Hollway (1984, 1989) termed the 'male sex drive' discourse, which draws on evolutionary principles to construct a biologically driven male sexuality and a subsequently absent female sexuality.

**Active/passive dichotomy of sexuality.** The construction of female sexuality has to a large extent been one of passivity and vulnerability whereby women are perceived as having

less desire and achieving sexual pleasure less easily than men (Farvid, 2015; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Frith 2013; Hayfield & Clarke, 2012; Hockey, Meah & Robinson, 2007; Tiefer 2008). Conversely male sexuality is juxtaposed as active, easily gratified and unbridled (Farvid, 2015; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Frith 2013, Hockey, Meah & Robinson, 2007; Tiefer, 2008). A permissive discourse (Hollway, 1984, 1989), which constructs sex around pleasure rather than reproduction and positions men and women as equally desiring subjects, is mostly absent from popular representations of heterosex and remains largely invisible in the wider socio-cultural context (Cairns, 1993; Fine, 2006; Tolman, 2012 Farvid & Braun, 2014; Frith 2013; Tiefer, 2008). Without the presence of a permissive discourse, female sexual agency continues to be a marginalised construct and heterosexuality remains mainly organised around male desire (Farvid & Braun, 2014; Frith 2013; Hockey, Meah & Robinson, 2007; Holland et al., 1994a).

Gavey et al. (1999) reported that most of their participants found the idea of men not wanting sex problematic; the absence of desire in men challenges 'male sex drive' discourse (Hollway, 1984, 1989). Participants managed the absence of desire in men by constructing it as a natural response to women's unattractiveness (see also Hollway, 1989). This finding was supported by Shah-Beckley and Clarke (2012) in their story completion research on sexual refusal. Participants were asked to complete one of two versions of a story stem involving long term partners Ben and Kate, and either Ben or Kate refusing the other's sexual advances. In the story where Ben refused to have sex with Kate, some participants evaded the possibility of absent male sexual desire by including additional female characters into the story that Ben was having sex with. Other participants echoed the proposition that coitus acts

as an indicator of female attractiveness (Gavey, 2005) and argued that the absence of male sexual desire was due to the female partner's unattractiveness.

Popular understandings of heterosexual relationships harbour not only a clear division of responsibility within relationships whereby 'women are supposed to do the romance in relationships and men are supposed to do the sex' (Wetherell, 1995, p.133), but also one of sexual dependency whereby women are not expected to pursue sexual pleasure for themselves but experience pleasure as part of men's pursuit of sexual pleasure. Women's sexuality is positioned as existing largely in relation to men's sexuality rather than in its own right (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012; Hockey, Meah & Robinson, 2007; Tiefer, 2001, 2003, 2008; Tolman, 2012; Tyler, 2008).

**Sexual reciprocity.** As well as being organized around the coital imperative, heterosex is shaped by a discourse of reciprocity (Braun et al., 2003). Reciprocity is a basic premise of egalitarian relationships, and is typically depicted as a 'good thing' within heterosexual sex and relationships (Braun et al., 2003). Braun et al. (2003) explored how a 'fair deal' in heterosex was taken to mean the reciprocal exchange of, and entitlement to, orgasms. Whilst reciprocity offers women greater entitlement to pleasure, it remains tightly interwoven with obligations and responsibilities, which risk turning reciprocal acts into tokenistic gestures.

The idea of a 'pseudo-reciprocal gift' exchange within heterosex was first originally examined by Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown (1992). The central proposition of 'pseudo-reciprocal gift' discourse is that:

‘Men require heterosexual sex to satisfy their sexual urges (corresponding to the male sex-drive discourse). However, in order to do so, this discourse relies on men viewing women as passive receptacles who must relinquish all control over their bodies, in ‘giving’ themselves, or in ‘giving’ sex to their male partners. In return, the man must try to please the woman, which entails, in most cases, trying to ‘give’ the woman an orgasm.’ (Gilfoyle et al., 1992, pp. 217–218)

The discourse of reciprocity produces a cultural obligation to reciprocate. For example, Frith (2013) observed how participants in her story completion study drew on reciprocity discourse to account for ‘faked’ orgasms. She found orgasms not only to be seen as a pleasure to be had but also as a pleasure to be given. Orgasms became vital components in affirming a male partner’s sexual expertise, identity and self-esteem (Frith, 2013); evoking orgasms in women was regarded as an important indicator of successful masculinity. In the event of a ‘missing’ female orgasm, Frith (2013) found that the women in the stories were compelled to take it upon themselves to ‘fake’ orgasms as a way to protect the male characters from damage to their masculinity. This is explained through women’s responsibility for taking on ‘emotion work’ in relationships; a principle that contends that women are socialised into managing other’s emotions, often at the expense of their own (Hochschild, 2012b). Frith (2013) demonstrated how permissive discourse was utilised to construct a notion of equal entitlement to orgasm which, while on the surface may give women greater access to sexual pleasures, equally serves to demand the production of faked orgasms as legitimate rewards for men’s attempts at pleasing women.

Farvid and Braun (2014) found that popular self-help books for men routinely advised men to ensure that the sex was pleasurable for women; the reason provided for this was to obtain opportunities to have more sex rather than for women's pleasure in itself. Braun et al. (2003) argued that the subject positions offered to women by pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse are just as problematic as any others – despite the promise of pleasure. In the absence of 'real' reciprocity only men are positioned as active agents, giving and taking pleasure.

**Hypersexualised culture.** The steady influence of an increasingly pornographic mainstream media (Attwood, 2006; McNair, 1996) has served to bring about a hypersexualised culture; on this one hand this appears to endorse greater expression of female sexuality, while on the other produces pressures to conform to overly sexualised versions of femininity. The cultural shift towards a more visible explicit female sexuality may be understood against the backdrop of the rise in 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005). Raunch culture has been described as producing a 'ladette identity' for women that allows women to behave in sexually explicit ways (Jackson, 2006: 343), including the active and open pursuit of sex. 'Raunch culture' is argued to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and encourage young women to not only talk more openly about sex, but also to engage in sexual behaviour with less restraint and without fear of moral judgement (Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007). However rather than liberating women, 'raunch culture' has served to further reinforce their oppression by asking women to perform their sexuality for men (Levy, 2005, p. 11). As such 'raunch culture' repackages the sexual objectification of women as empowerment, and is therefore less concerned with perpetuating progressive version of

female sexuality, and more with commercialising female sexual experience for the purposes of economic gain (Levy, 2005).

Critical feminist scholarship draws attention to the ways in which prescriptive notions of gender produce different entitlements and obligations for men and women in their performance of their sexuality. Thus sexual practice is not value free but constituted by social and cultural contexts that politicise individual choices. The discursive imperatives around the importance of coitus, orgasm and (pseudo)reciprocity in sexual encounters reproduce narrow gender roles that give unequal access to power and agency. Any discussion of sex and sexual practice therefore needs to take account of the social structures that constitute heterosex in a political context of power and powerlessness. Unless social inequalities are openly acknowledged in the therapeutic encounter, therapy runs the risk of becoming a silent perpetuator of oppressive social norms. This is particularly evident in mainstream sex therapy that disregards feminist conceptualisations of sex and to a great extent endorses medical models of sexuality. If counselling psychologists are to serve a wider social justice agenda and are to avoid the criticism, laid out in the following section, that have been made of current approaches to sex therapy (Denman, 2004; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2001, 2008, 2012), clinical competencies of working with sexual issues need to be underpinned by feminist and social constructionist models of sexuality and current challenges to sex therapy need to be understood.

### **Feminist Challenges to Current Approaches to Sex Therapy**

Feminist sexologists advocate a social approach to understanding people's anxieties about sex, arguing that social pressures around sexual performance and people's desire to be

normal are key to constituting such anxiety (Denman, 2004; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2001, 2008, 2012). Feminist and queer<sup>7</sup> scholars have argued that current approaches to sex therapy are predominantly informed by the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) nomenclature and underpinned by cognitive behavioural perspectives (Angel, 2012; Barker, 2011b; Denman, 2004; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2001, 2008, 2012). DSM nomenclature and the goal orientated nature of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)<sup>8</sup> produce binary distinctions between 'normal' and 'abnormal' sexual functioning, which perpetuate heteronormative version of 'good', 'normal' and 'natural' sex, largely conceptualised as penile-vagina penetration resulting in orgasm, where the man takes an active role and the woman a passive one (Denman, 2004; Gavey, 2005; Jackson, 1982, 1993; Jeffreys, 1990; Nicolson, 1993; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). Feminist sexological scholars (such as The Working Group on a New View of Women's Sexual Problems<sup>9</sup>, 2004) have expressed ongoing concern about the influence of both DSM distinctions of function and dysfunction and cognitive-behavioural frameworks on mainstream approaches to sex therapy, arguing that they are reductionist

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<sup>7</sup> Queer theory emerged in the 1990's out of post-structuralist ideas of deconstruction and a commitment to highlighting issues of power in the social constructions of sexual identity. Queer theorists challenge the binary construction of the sexes, genders and sexualities, campaigning for more fluid models of sexuality and advocating social change through the systematic deconstruction of binary positions.

<sup>8</sup> CBT is based on the principle that negative patterns of thought about the self and the world are the root cause of psychological distress. Treatment is underpinned by the idea that maladaptive behaviour is learnt and can therefore be unlearned. Negative thought patterns are challenged through behavioural experiments, which are thought to result in the learning of more adaptive behaviour and the subsequent decrease in psychological distress.

<sup>9</sup> The New View Campaign was formed in 2000 as a grassroots network of feminist academics (Alperstein, L.; Ellison, C.; Fishman, J. R.; Hall, M.; Handwerker, L.; Hartley, H. Kashak, E.; Kleinplatz, Loe, M.; Mamo, L.; Tavis, C; Tiefer, L.) to challenge the discourses about sexuality that the pharmaceutical industry draws on to market new medication. The goal of the New View Campaign is to expose biased research and promotional methods that serve corporate profit rather than people's pleasure and satisfaction (<http://www.newviewcampaign.org>).

and tend to favour bodily mechanics over the meanings of sexual encounters. The main goal of conventional sex therapy is to remove barriers (e.g. soft penises and closed vaginas) to sexual functioning, so that 'normal' (i.e. penetrative) sex can resume (Kleinplatz, 2012). Mainstream treatments such as PDE5 inhibitors<sup>10</sup> have been very successful in providing men with erections, and systematic desensitisation with dilators has enabled most women to have penile-vaginal intercourse. However, a preoccupation with enabling penetrative sex without situating this distress within a wider social discourse about the cultural significance of penetration (e.g. questioning whether penetration is indeed a desired or necessary outcome) ultimately reinforces narrow conceptualisations of 'normal' sex (Kaschak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2008, 2012).

The prioritisation of coitus thus places particular expectations, demands and constraints on individuals (Boyle, 1993; Gavey, 2005; Hockey, Meah & Robinson, 2007; Jackson, 1995; Kleinplatz, 2012; Potts, 2002, Tiefer, 2004, 2008). For example, Gavey et al. (1999) argued that coitus as a source of sexual pleasure disadvantages women due to the increase risk (e.g. unwanted pregnancy) and the relative difficulty in many women to experience orgasm through penetration (Hite, 2005). Gavey et al. (1999) argued that because heteronormativity positions coitus as the only 'real' and 'true' form of sex, women may choose to engage in coitus rather than other practices such as cunnilingus to avoid stigmatisation.

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<sup>10</sup> A phosphodiesterase type 5 inhibitor (PDE5 inhibitor) is a drug used to block the degradative action of cGMP-specific phosphodiesterase type 5 (PDE5) on cyclic GMP in the smooth muscle cells lining the blood vessels supplying the corpus cavernosum of the penis.

Treatments are thus offered too readily without a consideration of why the client finds it important to have, for example, penetrative sex; closing off important lines of enquiry about the potential meanings of the clients' anxiety. This reduction of sexual experiences to physiological responses is, at best, limiting and, at worst, dehumanising (Barker, 2011b; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2013; Tiefer, 2001, 2003, 2012). Liz Canner's (2009) documentary '*Orgasm Inc.*<sup>11</sup>' portrayed women accessing medical treatment, including surgical interventions, to treat their inability to orgasm through penetrative sex, despite being able to orgasm effectively through other means. Women were offered medical treatments, including high risk invasive surgery, for 'problems' that had no biological cause and were only seen to be problematic socially (Canner, 2009). Rather than offering medical treatments for 'problems', therapists should highlight, what Foucault (2003) called, 'the regulatory power' of social discourse on individuals' relationship with their own sexuality and offer clients ways of contextualising their desire to be normal (Kleinplatz, 2012).

Clients' distress about sex is intimately connected to sexual norms and therapy should focus on untangling heteronormative patriarchal ideology from individual experience, in order to offer clients new ways of understanding themselves (Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2008, 2012). Moreover, treatments that focus on goals often disregard the importance of pleasure and collude with anxieties about 'normality', turning therapy into an oppressive perpetuator of a 'toxic norm' that bypasses the importance of sexual pleasure, reduces

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<sup>11</sup> *Orgasm Inc* is an exposé of Vivus' (a pharmaceutical company) economically driven pursuit to develop pharmaceutical treatment for female sexual dysfunction (FSD).

Canner, who is employed by Vivus to produce erotic films for their drug trials, examines the scientific basis to medical industry claims about what constitutes "healthy" female sexuality and whether drugs and surgery are a suitable first-line approach to obtaining it. *Orgasm Inc.* is presented as a look inside the medical industry and the marketing campaigns that are literally and figuratively reshaping the public's lives concerning health, illness, desire, and orgasm.

diversity and promotes social conformity (Kleinplatz, 2012: 117). Feminist, queer and social constructionist informed approaches have the necessary sensitivity to recognise and address oppression. In the next section, I argue that it is particularly important for psychologists to engage with these approaches due to their influence on the wider care system. I contend that counselling psychologists in particular may be suited to driving a social justice agenda due to their theoretical foothold in alternatives to mainstream psychology.

### **Counselling Psychology: A Pioneer for Social Justice in Applied Psychology?**

Due to psychologists' influence on wider standards of therapeutic practice, it is particularly important for them to engage with frameworks that equip them to interrogate the social, cultural, historical and political environments in which they work (Milton et al., 2002). In 2007, the BPS, in partnership with the Department of Health (DoH), issued a document entitled *New Ways of Working for Applied Psychologists* (Onyett, 2007), which was aimed at encouraging psychological leadership in NHS mental health services. One identified facet of effective psychological leadership was the ability to offer authoritative alternatives to the medical model (Onyett, 2007). This was seen as particularly applicable in clinical settings that use a multi-disciplinary team working approach to bring a diverse range of views together to offer the best possible care for clients (Onyett, 2007). Psychologists' roles in the NHS have changed from working predominantly in isolation to being increasingly integrated into teams. In the document, Onyett outlines how psychologists in the NHS are expected to take up roles of clinical and organisational governance and are therefore increasingly looked towards as providing examples of best practice. Psychologists' authority in mental health settings means that their practice influences not only their work with clients but has

implications for the surrounding care systems and wider society. The underlying theoretical assumptions that training courses instil in trainees are therefore not neutral choice, but political (Bentall, 2004, 2010; Johnstone, 2000; Moon, 2007, 2008, 2011). The extent to which critical frameworks are taught on training programmes has been questioned and the need for trainees to be made aware of the political implications of their practice has been repeatedly emphasised (Bentall, 2004, 2010; Johnstone, 2000; Moon, 2007, 2008, 2011). Moon (2011) proposed the inclusion of queer challenges to the understanding of gender and sexuality on doctoral training programmes. She suggests that queer theory in particular 'provides new ground for rethinking, re-contextualizing and re-cognizing present-day therapeutic practices by questioning taken-for-granted knowledge' (Moon, 2011, p. 195). Training for psychologists in sexual issues should therefore not only focus on increasing trainees' awareness of their own discomfort and become more comfortable when discussing sex but also introduce trainees to critical, social constructionist writing on sex therapy in order to serve a wider social justice agenda.

On both sides of the Atlantic, there is widespread agreement that counselling psychology should be committed to a social justice agenda that explores oppression and the manifestations of power differences, inside and beyond the therapy room (Fouad & Prince, 2011; Milton, 2014; Morrow, Hawxhurst, Montes de Vegas, Abousleman and Castaneda, Pugh & Coyle, 2000; Strawbridge, 2002). Whilst in the UK, a commitment to social justice issues is outlined in the profession's value statements, such commitment is less clearly observable in its training and research outputs (Moller, 2011). British counselling psychology's 'overly rigid and often irrelevant identification with phenomenology and

humanistic values' (Moller, 2011; p. 8) has created barriers to participation in socially critical mental health research and practice. Counselling psychologists in the UK therefore, unnecessarily exclude themselves from debates that drive a wider social justice agenda and thus miss opportunities to meet the expectations set out in the professional practice guidelines. An effective examination of oppression needs to be anchored in an epistemological commitment to interrogate one's own value base as a person and, in a wider sense, counselling psychology as a whole (Moon, 2007, 2008, 2011; Toporeck, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar & Israel, 2006). While counselling psychology in the UK is rooted in a reflective-practitioner approach, and reflexivity is well integrated into the training programs, without socially critical reference points, reflexivity tends to be tokenistic. Critical frameworks thus need to be taught as part of the clinical competencies of counselling psychologists (Hicks & Milton, 2010; Hicks, 2010; Moon, 2010, 2011; Roughley & Morrison, 2013; Smith, Shin & Officer, 2012; Spinelli, 1997).

### **The Benefits of a Critical Framework for Counselling Psychology**

Having been described as 'nebulous and vague' (Cross & Watts, 2002 p. 293), it is clear that counselling psychology in the UK has failed to develop a strong professional identity. For example, Pugh and Coyle (2000) conclude from their analysis of the discursive constructions of British counselling psychologists' identity, a distinctive lack of a unique practice niche and suggested that counselling psychologists would benefit from engaging in a 'process of constructing a separate therapeutic space for counselling psychology in a new and purposeful way' (Pugh & Coyle, 2000, p.97).

A serious commitment to social justice would provide the profession with relevant and meaningful ways to establish themselves as social commentators and critics of mainstream psychology and offer an opportunity to follow the BPS professional guidelines more closely (Moller, 2011). However, as outlined formerly, unless social justice research is underpinned by a critical understanding of social process, it runs the risk of being counterproductive. While Moller (2011) advocated a departure from counselling psychology's loose affiliations to humanism and phenomenology, she fails to propose a new direction for counselling psychology's enquiry into social justice issues. In this thesis, I argue that social constructionism could be a suitable framework for doing so. Indeed, the critical counselling psychology approach to LGBT research (e.g., Hicks & Milton, 2010; Hicks, 2010; Milton, Coyle & Legg, 2002; Moon, 2010, 2011; Roughley & Morrison, 2013; Smith, Shin & Officer, 2012; Spinelli, 1997) has proven effective in marrying the discipline's interest in social justice with its research, training and practice aims; offering counselling psychology a set of values in support of its own critical roots as well as a firmer engagement with the political context of therapy (Milton, Craven & Coyle, 2010).

Critical counselling psychologists who have written about LGBT concerns and therapy argue that counselling psychology is well placed to be a driving force in promoting critical frameworks for psychological research and practice due to the explicit expectation in the professional practice guidelines that practitioners understand the social, cultural and historical dynamics that influence them and their practice (Milton, Craven & Coyle, 2010). Counselling psychologists, like all people, exist within social, cultural and political environments and, as reflective practitioners need to assume responsibility for the meanings

they co-construct with their clients (Hicks, 2010). Indeed, the most relevant feature of social constructionism to the field of counselling psychology is the willingness to not only challenge dominant patterns of meaning but also understand its own position in relation to such meanings (Burr, 2003). Within applied psychology, a critical perspective on psychological practice develops the scientist-practitioner and reflective practitioner perspective and provides a framework for unpicking the tensions between being both a generator and a critical consumer of knowledge (Milton, Craven & Coyle, 2010; Tindall, Robinson & Kagan, 2010). The critical-practitioner thus locates their practice socially, culturally, historically and politically and interrogates the 'context' of their work by examining deeply embedded social structures that privilege some people, while marginalising others (Milton, Craven & Coyle, 2010).

Heteronormative patriarchal values continue to colour psychological practice (Tindall & Robinson, 2010). In the absence of access to critical frameworks, therapists are likely to draw on mainstream understandings of sex and sexuality which are at best limiting and at worst perpetuate oppression and inadvertently exacerbate individual distress. Therapists' underlying assumptions are pivotal in shaping the therapeutic process and therefore need to be interrogated.

### **Research Aims**

Using the SC method, the initial objective of the research is to offer a detailed examination of how heteronormativity may continue to constrain people's conceptualisations of sexual expression and provide unequal access to power within relationships. In order to elicit representations of heterosexual, story stems were selected that reflected current cultural

anxieties around people's concerns with being normal: discovering a partner masturbating and a partner suggesting sexual experimentation (Barker, 2013b; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013; Harvey & Gill, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2003, 2008; Tuck, 2009). The participant sample is constituted by therapists and people who have not been therapeutically trained and both groups contained equal numbers of men and women. This research aims to increase current knowledge on the several advantages that SC methods holds over more traditional research methods, particularly with regard to implementing comparative designs. For example, the comparative element of the SC method allows this research to explore how the gender of the participant and the gender of the characters in the story influence the constructions of heterosex in the stories. Furthermore, it allows the research to explore if therapists' draw on heteronormative conceptualisations of sex, sexual identity and sexual practice to the same extent as people who have not been therapeutically trained. The complex comparative element of SC method thus enables a detailed examination of therapists' use of discourse. Particularly by exploring differences and similarities between therapists' and non-therapists' use of discourse, conclusions may be drawn about the possible influence of training in shaping the assumptions that underpin conceptualisations of heterosex.

As such there are three levels to the aims of this research. First, this research endeavours to explore how heterosex is constructed in the context of masturbation and sexual experimentation. On this level as the following types of questions are considered: What are the different ways that masturbation is made sense of in the stories? What meanings are attributed to sexual experimentation? On a second level, this research seeks to examine how the gendered subjectivity of the male and female characters in the stories is

constructed and considers questions such as: 'How is Chris's masturbation made sense of compared to Emily's? How is Sarah's reaction to sexual experimentation constructed compared to Matt's? The third level of interrogation of the data focuses on differences between the different participant groups. On this level question such as: 'how do women's stories differ from those written by men?' and how do therapists' stories differ from those who have not been therapeutically trained.'

## Methodology

### Qualitative Methods and Counselling Psychology

Counselling psychology sets itself apart from other branches of applied psychology by adopting a value base that rejects 'expert' positions of knowing and respects multiple perspectives (Pugh & Coyle, 2000; Woolfe et al. 2010). The BPS (2005) expects counselling psychologists 'to negotiate between perceptions and world views but not to assume the automatic superiority of any one way of experiencing, feeling, valuing and knowing' (pp. 1-2). Qualitative research is concerned with elucidating less known aspects of experience and aims to 'delve into complex processes and illustrate the multifaceted nature of human phenomena' (Morrow, 2007, p. 211).

As such, both counselling psychology and qualitative research share a commitment to widen the current knowledge base to include a wider representation of experience. Both the counselling psychologist and the qualitative researcher seek a facilitative position and reject expert positions; both positioning themselves alongside rather than as experts in other

people's experience (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2002). Qualitative research is therefore well suited to the ethos of counselling psychology; the specific ontological and epistemological frameworks that are drawn upon in this research is set out in more detail below.

### **Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions**

The BPS urges counselling psychologists to understand and interrogate 'the context in which they work and the impact such a context is likely to have on the client's therapeutic experience' (BPS, 2009, p. 7). Rather than regarding 'context' as neutral and objectifiable, I assume that contexts vary according to the different meanings attached to them. As such I argue that the meaning of 'context' is constructed through social process and hence comes to be power bearing and value ridden (Foucault, 1980; 2003). Hiles (1999) stressed the importance of researchers choosing a methodology that corresponds with their political, ontological and epistemological standpoint. In my view rigorous interrogation and meaningful understanding of 'context', necessitates a social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2003).

As such, this research is underpinned by a social constructionist (Burr, 2003) and specifically, a post-structuralist (Butler, 2004; 2006) epistemology. Social constructionism rejects the notion of an objectifiable 'reality' in favour of the assumption that 'reality' is a socially constructed phenomenon. Social constructs are versions of reality and must therefore be constantly maintained and re-affirmed in order to persist (Butler, 2006; Foucault, 2003). The aim of post-structuralism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups use discourse to participate in the construction of their social reality (Butler, 2006; Foucault, 2003).

A poststructuralist reading of data involves rejecting the notion that the researcher has privileged access into participants' real thoughts and feelings in favour of the recognition that 'we have no access either to our own emotions or to those of others, independent of or unmediated by the discourse of our culture' (Jaggar, 1993 p. 148). SC method elicits productions of heterosex in the participants' constructions of the stories and therefore readily lends itself as a post-structuralist research method that not only tap into social discourse but also allows for multiple comparisons to be drawn between different versions of stories and different participant groups.

### **Story Completion Method**

Story completion (SC) originally developed as a projective test to assess personality and psychopathology in clinical contexts (see Rabin & Zlotogorski, 1981). Projective tests require respondents to interpret ambiguous stimuli – such as inkblots (Rorschach, Lemkau and Kronenberg, 1921/1998). It is assumed that respondents unwittingly reveal unconscious or socially undesirable aspects of their personality in their interpretation of ambiguous stimuli. Projective tests are underpinned by psychoanalytic theory (Rabin, 2001), which assumes that large portions of the self exist in unconscious experience and are inaccessible to both clients and clinicians through conventional self-report. Murray (1943/1971) proposed that projective tests can access unconscious material and thereby provide 'an x-ray picture of [the] inner self'.

The forerunner of current forms of SC is the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) (Murray, 1943/1971) which requires respondents to write a story about ambiguous images. In interpreting the TAT story completions, the administrator largely relies on their clinical

judgment. In research settings projective techniques have been used empirically to access unconscious motivation, for example, in consumer and business research (e.g., Donoghue, 2000; Soley and Smith, 2008) and in developmental psychology (e.g., George and West, 2012; Bretherton, Oppenheim, Emde and the MacArthur Narrative Working Group, 2003; Bretherton, Ridgewa and Cassidy, 1990).

Braun and Clarke (2016) noted that quantitative designs commonly employ complex coding systems to make sense of the trends in participants' responses, which 'turn the rich narrative detail into numbers and categories suitable for quantitative analysis' (p. 4) and therefore forfeit 'valuable, in-depth information' (p. 4) in the process. A qualitative reading of stories allows the full richness of the data to be part of the analysis. An essentialist lens of regarding the data as harbouring a truth that can be discovered through the research process, poses challenges to more critically informed qualitative research positions (Braun & Clarke, 2016). This challenge has been overcome by researchers using a social constructionist approach to analysis (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al, 2015; Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2012). Rather than assuming that SC can reveal hidden truths about the test takers (i.e. essentialist epistemology), through the identification of discourses, tropes, discursive repertoires or constructions (i.e. social constructionist epistemology, Burr, 2003) the stories are regarded as revealing hidden truths about the test takers' social environment.

In a landmark study, two feminist psychologists (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995), analysed SC data to demonstrate the difference between essentialist and social constructionist readings of data on gendered representations of infidelity. They used a comparative design,

with two story stems (i.e. opening lines of a story), to explore differences in of representation of male and female infidelity in the stories written by female and male undergraduates. The story stem was: 'John and Claire have been going out for over a year. Then Claire realises that John is seeing someone else' (p. 352). To assess representations of female infidelity the same story stem was used but the names of the characters were swapped around so that 'John realises Claire has been seeing someone else' (p. 352). An essentialist reading of the data evidenced gender differences in 'attitudes' to infidelity, whereas the social constructionist reading regarded data 'as reflecting contemporary discourses upon which subjects draw in making sense of experience' (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995, pp. 349-350). To date SC has been applied in only a small number of qualitative studies (Clarke et al., 2014; Frith, 2013; Gavin, 2005; Kitzinger and Powell, 1995; Livingston and Testa, 2000; Shah-Beckley and Clarke, 2012; Walsh and Malson, 2002; Whitty, 2005).

Applied within a social constructionist paradigm, SC has 'the potential to reach the parts that other methods cannot reach' (Clarke, 2016, p. 2) and has considerable advantages over self-report methods in examining socially sensitive topics such as heterosex. Moreover, SC enables the use of comparative designs that pose a challenge for more traditional qualitative research models and methods of data collection (e.g interviews). Using comparative designs allow a more sensitive exploration of how different social groups are represented in wider culture (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

It is important to recognise the tensions in using comparative designs within a qualitative framework; as the use of comparisons may be interpreted as connoting an underlying positivist or essentialist sensibility. In their original outline of the application SC

method within a qualitative framework, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) illustrated the difference between an essentialist and a social constructionist reading of SC data. The Authors argued that an essentialist reading of the data would make claims about psychological differences between young men and young women. For example, it could be argued that the data demonstrate the 'existence of male emotional illiteracy, men's displacement of emotional concerns onto sexuality, their desperate need to prove their masculinity by sexual conquest and their objectification of, and violent feelings towards, women. By the same token, this reading would see in our findings evidence for young women's apparent lack of autonomous sexual desire, their need to experience and to interpret sexual arousal as love and the extent to which their femininity is related to their sense of themselves as objects of male desire' (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995, p. 366). The authors go on to outline a social constructionist reading of the data that, by contrast, provides 'exemplars of available 'accounts', 'discourses', 'repertoires' or 'narratives' in the social world'. Thus, the data is understood not as indicative of underlying 'feelings', 'motives', 'fears', 'anxieties' or 'understandings' but rather as linguistic products that draw on, reflect and contribute to ways of talking about or representing heterosexual relationships. Kitzinger and Powell (1995) thus argued that such tensions could be overcome by using a social constructionist lens to interpret the stories. Within a social constructionist reading of the data, the data is understood as representations of participants' social and cultural milieu. The individual people within a participant group are therefore seen to not share innate characteristics, but that rather that their membership of a social category provides access to certain discursive repertoires. For example, as Kitzinger and Powell (1995) argued young men's greater use of pornographic discourse compared to young women's greater use of romantic discourses connote differences within their

respective social environments rather than highlighting anything particular about their individual psychologies. The status ascribed to the data in this research is therefore solely representational of participants' social world. The differences arising through any comparisons highlight differences in participants' social environments and thus serve to elucidate aspects in social positioning rather than innate differences.

In line with previous SC research which employed a social constructionist framework to explore heterosex (Clarke et al, 2015; Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2012) the current research also rejects an essentialist reading in favour of a post-structuralist analysis of the discourses in the data that dominate and shape participants cultural understandings around heterosex. As such, this research is not aiming to draw any conclusions about participants' own experiences of heterosex; the aim is to explore the social discourses utilised by participants as they attempt to make sense of the scenarios described in the story stems.

Asking participants to write hypothetical scenarios about other people's behaviour allows participants to 'relax their guard' and write with less reserve than if they were asked about their own behaviour directly (Will, Eadie & MacAskill, 1996). SC is therefore well equipped at overcoming the 'social desirability 'barrier' of self-report research' (Moore, Gullone and Kostanski, 1997: 372). Social desirability may be a particular issue when researching therapists as therapeutic training encourages a detached and overt 'politically correct' stance in therapists (Tribe, 2015), which may mask underlying socially undesirable views.

SC makes the exploration of sensitive topics possible because participants are asked

about hypothetical scenarios. SC captures responses from people who may be uncomfortable about discussing, or even unwilling to discuss, their own experience of, for example, sexual practice (Clarke, 2016). SC has been used to explore sensitive topics including 'orgasmic absence' (Frith, 2013) and sex offending (Gavin, 2005).

For the purpose of this study I am interested in comparing responses between different representation of sex and sexuality, how women conceptualise sex and sexuality differently from men, and how therapists' conceptualisations may or may not differ from people who have not been therapeutically trained. These layered analytic components have been successfully integrated into a SC design. For example, in Braun and Clarke's (2013) application of SC, two versions of one story were used to explore people's perceptions of trans-parenting. Their story stem described a parent telling their children that they are uncomfortable living within their assigned gender and want to start the process of changing sex. In the other version of the story, the gender of the parent was reversed. The two versions enabled participants to compare the responses both according to the gender of the parent character and the gender of the participant. They argued that this was useful in exploring the interplay between the different ways in which mothers and fathers are represented in the wider culture, as well as representations of transgender (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Similarly, in her SC research on orgasmic 'absence', Frith (2013) used two versions of a story stem about a heterosexual couple: Lisa and Ben. In one version Ben realises that Lisa has not had an orgasm, and in the other version the scenario is reversed. Frith's (2013) analysis revealed how 'discursive imperatives around the importance of orgasm [...] reproduce unequal gendered relationships to produce different entitlements and obligations for men

and women' (p. 11). Frith (2013) illustrated how women were represented as holding responsibility for maintaining men's sexual interest by being sexually attractive, whereas men were characterised by a depiction of sexuality that was unbridled and easy to satisfy.

The implementation of comparative components of SC fit well with research focused on understanding the operation of social categories such as gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality (Clarke, 2016). It enables researchers to explore how different social groups make sense of social scenarios in different ways and how membership of a particular social category may provide, or prevent, access to a particular social discourse. So far SC has only been used to explore how the gender of the participant impacts on the choice of discourse used in the stories. This study will extend the application of SC by exploring if therapists draw on different discourses to those who have not been therapeutically trained. This will advance current knowledge on the application of SC and open up interesting avenues for future research using social categories.

### **Design of Story Stems**

The story stems were designed on the basis of their potential to tap into cultural anxieties around people's concern with being normal (Barker, 2011b; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2003, 2008). I therefore chose one scenario that depicts an area of sex that has been, and continues to be, presented as problematic and anxiety-evoking: masturbation (Allen, 2000; Laqueur, 2003; Stengers & Van Neck 2001; Van Driel & Vincent, 2012; Tuck, 2009) as well as one which depicts a practice that is frequently advocated in mainstream sex advice, and may therefore be familiar to therapist in their professional capacity: sexual

experimentation (Farvid & Braun, 2013, 2006; Harvey & Gill, 2001).

**Masturbation.** Large scale population studies in the UK such as the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL-1, 1990; -2, 2000; and -3, 2010) conclude that masturbation is a common practice. The current figures reported that 73% (Gerressu, Mercer, Graham, Wellings, Johnson, 2008) and 67.8% (Mercer, Tanton, Prah, Ehrens, Sonnenberg, 2013) of men and 36.8% (Gerressu, et al) and 34.1% (Mercer et al, 2013) of women have masturbated in the previous four weeks.

While masturbation may be a common experience it continues to challenge social understandings of sexuality (Laqueur, 2003; Tuck, 2009), elicit feelings of discomfort and guilt among people (Allen, 2000; Laqueur, 2003; Stengers & Van Neck 2001; Van Driel & Vincent, 2012; Tuck, 2009), and be 'met with silence or trepidation in the scientific and educational communities' (Kaestle & Allen, 2011, p. 983). Traditional marriage and relationship research as constructed masturbation as a compensatory practice for 'real' heterosex that connotes a deterioration in relationships quality (Langstrom & Hanson, 2006). However, with the increasing sexualisation of popular culture (Attwood, 2009) masturbation has gained growing representational visibility across a range of mainstream media. For example, Tuck (2009) reported that since the 1990s, depictions of male and female masturbation in mainstream film and advertising are increasing. In addition, there is a growing conscious effort within feminist scholarship (e.g. Hogarth and Ingham, 2009; Kaestle and Allen, 2011; Stein, 2012; Coleman, 2002a, 2002b) to 'identify masturbation as a strategy to improve sexual health, promote relational intimacy, and reduce unwanted pregnancy, STIs, and HIV transmission' (Kaestle & Allen, 2011: 983). However, despite some academic interest in cultural

representations of masturbation it remains a highly contested and even a taboo topic in wider culture (Allen, 2000; Laqueur, 2003; Stengers & Van Neck 2001; Van Driel & Vincent, 2012; Tuck, 2009). The selection of masturbation as the focus of one of the story stems was based on the idea of examining the regulatory power of sexual norms by exploring a potentially socially taboo sexual practice.

**Sexual experimentation.** In recent years, sexual experimentation has increasingly been portrayed as an essential and necessary aspect of heterosexual relationships (Farvid & Braun, 2013, 2006; Harvey & Gill, 2001). In their analysis of sex advice in popular magazines, Farvid and Braun (2013, 2006) found that sexual experimentation was presented as an effective and compulsory strategy for women to ‘have’ and ‘hold’ men in relationships and for men to demonstrate their sexual prowess and superiority. This was echoed in Harvey and Gill’s (2011) commentary on the Channel 4 TV show ‘*The Sex Inspectors*’ (2007), which showed that sexual experimentation was consistently advocated as a legitimate avenue to achieve better relationships and greater sexual satisfaction. The use of sexual experimentation in the story stem is therefore not only a contemporary and familiar sexual scenario but also one that may elicit participants’ negotiation of prescriptive ideas of ‘normal’ (hetero) sex (Barker, 2011b; Kleinplatz, 2012; Tiefer, 2008).

## Research Design

Participants were presented with two story stems about a heterosexual couple in a sexual relationship. The first scenario depicted a couple where one partner finds the other masturbating and the second a couple where one partner suggests ‘trying something new’ to the other. Following SC research (e.g. Clarke et al. 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Frith, 2013;

Kizinger & Powell 1995; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2012), the names of the characters were swapped around (see table 1 below).

**Table 1: The different versions of the two story stems**

<b>Masturbation Story (Chris):</b>	<i>Emily and Chris have been together for a while. One night Emily finds Chris masturbating...</i>
<b>Masturbation Story (Emily):</b>	<i>Chris and Emily have been together for a while. One night Chris finds Emily masturbating...</i>
<b>Sexual Experimentation Story (Matt):</b>	<i>Matt and Sarah have been having sex for a while, tonight Matt suggests trying something new...</i>
<b>Sexual Experimentation Story (Sarah):</b>	<i>Sarah and Matt have been having sex for a while, tonight Sarah suggests trying something new...</i>

As recommended by Clarke (2016) the story stems feature some elements of deliberate ambiguity (see also Kitzinger & Powell, 1995). The deliberate use of ambiguity of time ('a while'), relationship status ('been together') and sexual activity ('having sex') in the story stem increase the onus on participants to draw on culturally available discourses to 'fill in the blanks' (Clarke, 2016, p. 3). Deliberate ambiguity increases the variability and richness of data and helps to reduce the researchers influence on participants' writing (Clarke, 2016). Following the presentation of the story stem, participants were given instructions on how to

complete the story. These were:

*What happens next? Your story can unfold over the next minutes, hours, days, weeks, months or years. Please write at least 15 lines or 150 words.*

The small body of SC literature has reported large variation in story length. For example, the stories produced in Clarke et al. (2015) ranged from 71–647 words (average 258); Shah-Beckley and Clarke's (2012) stories ranged from 8-520 words (average 195). Whilst Frith's (2013) stories ranging from 4-285 words (average 72) and Walsh and Malson (2010) ranged from 100 to 490. The inclusion of instructions has been advocated to promote greater task engagement and obtain longer stories (Clarke, 2016). To recruit motivated participants, Clarke (2016) suggested the use of volunteer samples over student research participation pools. This study pioneered the use of non-university student samples in SC research by recruiting participants primarily from online interest groups (participant characteristics and recruitment procedures are discussed in more detail below).

Frith (2013) examined how the gender of the characters in the stories affected the representation of blame for the absent orgasm and the solutions offered to secure subsequent orgasms and Clarke et al. (2015) used a comparative design to examine the impact of gender and sexuality on different representations of reasons for infidelity. While both studies found ample difference between the different gender and sexualities of the characters, neither of the above studies evidenced the differences between the stories written by female and male respondents found in previous studies (e.g. Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2005). Clarke et al. (2015) suggest that a larger sample might generate a wider range of responses and thus more gender differences. Clarke et al's (2015) sample (N = 56)

and Frith's (2013) sample (N = 88) were smaller than both Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) sample (N = 116) and Whitty's (2005) sample (N = 234).

The design therefore created three possible comparative levels of analysis: The first level allowed comparisons between the discourses underpinning the differences in the constructions of the female and the male character; the second level allowed comparisons between the differences in the discourses underpinning the stories of therapeutically-trained participants compared to those who have not been therapeutically trained. If grouped according to gender, the second interpretative level also allowed for an analysis of how the gender of the participants interacted with the stories produced. The third level allowed analysis of the relationship between gender and the experience of training. These three levels are represented in Figures 2 and 3 below:

#### Level of comparative Analysis

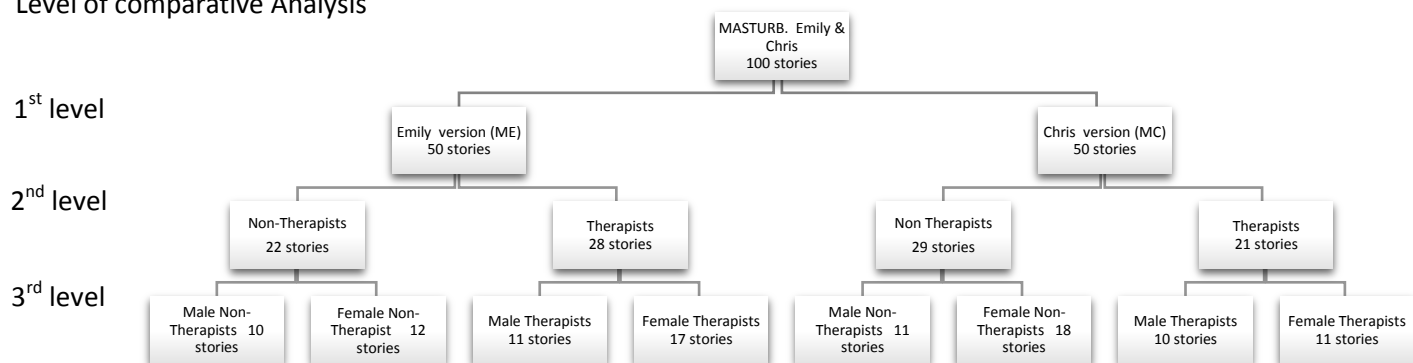


Figure 2: Number of participant stories per comparative level (masturbation stem)

#### Level of comparative Analysis

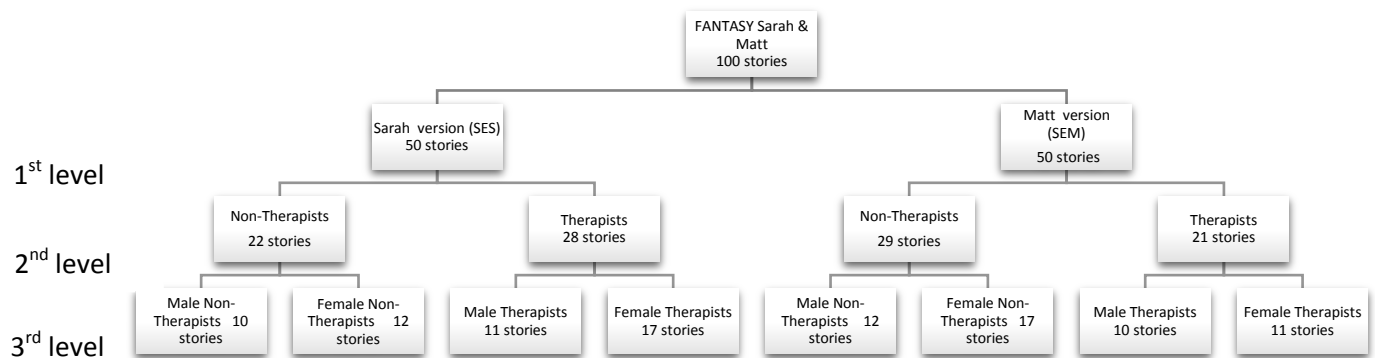


Figure 3: Number of participant stories per comparative level (sexual experimentation stem)

Following the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2013) on sample size for story completion research there were a minimum of 10 participants per story stem variation on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of comparative analysis. There were a minimum of 22 stories on the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of comparative analysis, and 50 stories on the 1<sup>st</sup> level of comparative analysis. Building up from there, this produced an overall minimum of 100 stories for each stem.

A convenience sample of 110 participants, each completing two stories, was obtained over the course of 6 months through online data collection. Quota sampling was used to ensure roughly comparable numbers of therapists and non-therapists, and male and female participants. Female non-therapists were the easiest group to recruit and the required number of completions from this group was achieved before the required amount of completions were achieved for the other participant groups. Because it was impossible to alter the study in any way once it had gone live, data had to be continued to be collected from all participant groups until a minimum count was reached for all participant groups. Once sufficient stories were collected subsequent stories from this participant group were

discounted. The ethical implication of discarding excess data has been considered on the basis of weighing up the researcher's commitment to honouring the time participants took in providing data and the need to achieve a balanced sample for the purposes of comparing the responses of the different participant groups. The fact that the research was conducted online, that participants did not offer personal stories, did not travel or incurred demands on their time other than writing the stories, meant that the participants' investment of time were considered to be relatively minimal compared to data collection methods such as interviews. The conclusion was reached that the least invasive method of avoiding an overload of data by one participant group would be to decide on a maximum number of stories per participant group and to discount any subsequent data rather than 'cherry picking' particularly rich data or altering the instructions for recruitment.

### Data Collection

Data were gathered electronically using *Qualtrics* online survey software (<http://www.qualtrics.com/>). In order to reach motivated participants, the link was listed in several *Facebook* interest groups on, as well as sent out to personal email addresses via various interest-based Listservs. The Listservs were obtained through JISCMail, which is an online charity that holds an extensive UK database of email discussion lists for education and research communities. (For the full list of Listserv and Facebook interest groups used see Appendix C). For additional non-therapist participants, I approached organisations I had professional relationships with to ask for permission to circulate the link to the study among employees (for a full list see Appendix C). To obtain further participants for the therapist sample, I approached various training courses for trainee counselling and clinical

psychologists to ask for permission to circulate the link to my study via email. By clicking on the link participants were directed to information about the study and the potential uses of their data. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and consent was obtained via the survey software. Only after participants had indicated their consent by clicking on an online box were they directed to the story completion tasks.

The majority of SC research asked participants to complete one story only (Clarke, 2016), I was interested in exploring the use of multiple stories for each participant further, as it reduced the size of the sample needed and could therefore yield interesting pragmatic potential for future SC research (for use of multiple stories see Gavin, 2005; Walsh & Malson, 2010). To circumvent the potential for writing fatigue to impact on participants' writing of the second story, all versions had equal likelihood of occurring as the first story. Whilst overall writer fatigue was not observable in the difference between the length of the first and second story, seven therapists and three non-therapists only completed the first story. The stories written in response to the masturbation cue were 324 words on average and the stories written in response to the sexual experimentation cue were an average of 271 words, comparing satisfactorily to story length reported in previous SC research (Clarke et al., 2015, average = 258; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2012, average = 195; Frith, 2013, average = 72) words.

After completing the stories participants were asked to provide demographic data, by answering a mix of open-ended and closed questions (for a comprehensive list see Appendix B).

### **Participant Demographics**

Demographic information was collected from participants to 'situate the sample' culturally (Elliot, Fisher & Rennie 1999). The primary function of this was to be able to take account of any specific demographic differences between the subsamples of women and men, or therapists and non-therapists, to ensure greater confidence in attributing any differences found to the social categories of the sub samples and not another difference (e.g. age, ethnicity or class). The sample was made up of approximately equal numbers of therapists (N= 58) and non-therapists (N= 53). 'Therapist' was used as a label to encompass all professionals who identified as applying psychological therapy with clients (e.g counselling and clinical psychologists, CBT therapists, psychotherapists, systemic therapists and psychodynamic therapists etc.). Because I was not interested in the impact of a particular therapeutic tradition per se, but rather the impact of therapeutic training on people's relationship to heteronormative patriarchal discourse, 'therapists' from diverse training backgrounds were included. Whilst therapeutic training encompasses a broad array of philosophical orientations, there is a common expectation that therapists will have a greater understanding of the human condition and a more sophisticated grasp of social relationships (Feltham, 2007).

'Non-therapists' was used as a label of convenience to describe those who reported non-therapeutic professions. There were many similarities between the therapist and non-therapist sample. Both groups contained comparable numbers of women and men (therapist, F= 30/58; M=28/58; non-therapist, F=30/53; M=24/53).

The majority of the sample identified as heterosexual (N = 91/111). Two female therapists identified as bisexual, compared to six female non-therapists who identified as

bisexual. A further two non-therapist identified as lesbian compared to no therapist. The number of gay men in both the therapist and non-therapist samples was three, and no men identified as bisexual. Both therapists (N= 27/58) and non- therapists (N= 22/53) most commonly reported their age as 31-40. Similarly, both therapists (N= 48/58) and non-therapists (N= 45/53) most commonly identified as white. More men (N= 11/54) than women (N= 3/60) identified as black or Asian. Both therapists and non-therapists were more likely to report being in a current relationship than not (therapists: partnered, N= 45/58; single, N= 10/58; non-therapists: partnered, N= 38/53; single, N= 11/53). See table 2 below.

**Table 2: Participant demographics**

<i>Participant Group</i>	<i>Female Therapists</i>	<i>Male Therapists</i>	<i>Total Therapists</i>	<i>Female N-Therapists</i>	<i>Male N-Therapists</i>	<i>Total NT</i>
<i>Total Number</i>	30	28	<b>58</b>	30	24	<b>53</b>
<i>Heterosexual</i>	28	25	<b>53</b>	19	19	<b>38</b>
<i>Bisexual</i>	2	-	<b>2</b>	6	-	<b>6</b>
<i>Gay Men</i>	-	3	<b>3</b>	-	3	<b>3</b>
<i>Lesbian</i>	-	-	<b>-</b>	2	-	<b>2</b>
<i>SND*</i>	-	-	<b>-</b>	3	2	<b>5</b>
<i>21-30</i>	8	7	<b>15</b>	11	6	<b>17</b>
<i>31-40</i>	16	11	<b>27</b>	11	11	<b>22</b>
<i>41-50</i>	2	6	<b>8</b>	3	2	<b>5</b>
<i>51+</i>	3	3	<b>6</b>	4	3	<b>7</b>
<i>SND*</i>	-	-	<b>-</b>	-	-	<b>-</b>
<i>White</i>	27	22	<b>48</b>	29	19	<b>45</b>
<i>Black</i>	-	5	<b>5</b>	-	3	<b>3</b>

<i>Asian</i>	2	1	<b>3</b>	-	2	<b>2</b>
<i>Middle Eastern</i>	-	-	-	1	-	<b>1</b>
<i>Mixed Ethnicity</i>	1	-	<b>1</b>	1	-	<b>1</b>
<i>PNTS</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Single</i>	2	8	<b>10</b>	7	5	<b>11</b>
<i>Partnered</i>	26	19	<b>45</b>	22	16	<b>38</b>
<i>SND*</i>						

\*SND = supplied no data

**Therapist group.** Almost half of the therapist group reported professional experience of under 5 years (1-5year, N = 25/58). This was comparable for both male and female therapists (FT, N = 15; MT, N = 10). Eighteen out of 58 reported professional experience of under ten years and a further ten reported professional experience exceeding ten years. Male therapists were proportionally more experienced than female therapists. Just over half of therapists reported no professional training in sexual issues (N = 34/58). Six female therapists reported having trained as sex therapists compared to one male therapist. The majority of therapists reported sexual issues to feature occasionally in their work with clients, nine out of 58 reported that clients never talked about sexual issues and twelve out of 58 said that it was brought up frequently. Seven out of the twelve therapists that reported sex featuring frequently as part of their clients' therapy, were trained sex therapists, and the other five had had training in working with sexual issues. Similarly, all nine therapists whom reported sex never coming up in therapy also reported not having had any training in working with sexual issues. Apart from a slight overrepresentation of male humanistic therapists (12/58)

therapists reported comparable numbers of different therapeutic orientation. Two female therapists and 3 male therapists chose to supply no data for most of the demographic questions. See Table 3 below:

**Table 3: Professional practice characteristics of therapist sample**

<i>Year of Practice</i>	<i>Female Therapists</i>	<i>Male Therapists</i>	<i>Total Therapists</i>
1-5	15	10	25
6-10	9	9	18
11+	3	7	10
SND	2	3	5
<b>Amount of training in sexual issues</b>			
No Training	14	20	34
Some Training	8	5	12
Sex Therapist	6	1	7
SND	2	3	5
<b>How frequently does sex come up in your work with clients?</b>			
Never	5	4	9
Occasionally	16	18	34
Frequently	7	5	12
SND	1	2	3
<b>Therapeutic orientation</b>			
Psychodynamic	8	3	11
Humanistic	6	12	18
CBT	7	3	10
Systemic	7	8	13
SND	2	3	5

### Thematic Analysis

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2013) approach to thematic analysis (TA), which is composed of six phases of coding and theme development. TA is not constrained by inbuilt theoretical assumptions, thus Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that researchers clearly specify the theoretical framework that underpins data analysis. As previously noted, this research draws on a social constructionist epistemology (Burr, 2003).

Data analysis grounded in a social constructionist epistemology examines how discourses govern our socio-cultural environment (Mills, 2004; Sunderland, 2004) with the ultimate aim of making the invisible social structures that constrain and restrict certain ways of being, visible. Thus a social constructionist interrogation of the data involves the process of searching for discursive patterns in participants' writing, that serve to construct particular social 'truths' about heterosexuality (Butler, 2004). In this study I attempted to understand the discourses that underpin current meanings of heterosex and the possible social inequalities that are produced. I was particularly interested in how current constructs of heterosex offer different subject positions to men and women and to what extent they provide unequal access to power (Foucault, 2003).

**Data Analysis.** In the first phase data were read and re-read to note any initial analytic observations (phase 1). The second phase involved a process of systematic data coding, identifying key features of the data (phase 2), which was then examined for broader patterns of meaning or 'candidate themes' (phase 3). After a process of review and refinement (phases 4 and 5), various themes were generated. The write-up constituted the final phase (6) of analysis and involved selecting illustrative data extracts and the weaving together of theme

definitions (5) and other analytic notes into a coherent analytic narrative.

TA has been used slightly differently to analyse SC data compared to how it is used to analyse self-report data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012). Instead of identifying patterns across the stories as a whole, patterns are identified in specific elements of the story. For example, SC research on perceptions of infidelity in relationships has identified themes in how the relationship (both that between the couple, and that between the unfaithful partner and the 'other' man/woman) is depicted, how infidelity is accounted for, and how the responses to and consequences of infidelity are presented (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2005).

Following previous SC research, where appropriate, I report my findings in percentages to illustrate the prevalence of particular themes in the data. This is well suited to a comparative approach as it helps to illustrate the different ways phenomena are conceptualised by different participant groups.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study received ethical approval from the Health and Life Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) of the University of the West of England.

Any research should place the welfare of the participants at the heart of decision-making. In accordance with the BPS (2009) guidelines on obtaining informed consent from participants, this study asked participants to read the information screen, click a box to indicate they had read and understood it, and click a separate box to proceed with the research. The research was designed in such a way that it was impossible for participants to

proceed to the study without having read the information about participation or indicating their consent first.

### **Pre data analysis reflexivity**

Murck and Mey (2010) urge researchers to consider the importance of both acknowledging prior knowledge and bringing this into the open. This section therefore aims to make my position as a researcher clear. When participating in qualitative research it is recommended that the researcher keeps a journal and memos throughout the process (Murck and Mey, 2010), these journals are drawn on here to illuminate my thoughts and interests in this subject area.

Whilst I aim to use critical feminist theory to make sense of the data, I also acknowledge the impact of my previous experience of using SC in research particularly on the process of coding. For example, codes and themes that I identified in my previous research on sexuality may be more apparent to me than if I hadn't analysed SC data before. I may therefore unwittingly be prone to replicate my previous findings.

Furthermore, I acknowledge that the analysis is my interpretation and therefore depends on my interpretative resources and personal standpoint (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). All discussion around sexual material, including this study, is inevitably framed within the discourses available in contemporary culture (Foucault 2003). So while this research study aimed to explore and outline discursive practices within society, this exploration was equally mediated by the discourses available in the prevailing culture at the time of writing.

In this research I attempted to merge my two professional identities of practitioner and researcher. As a practitioner I work with individual experience and subjective meaning; as a researcher I work with cultural experience and collective meaning. One invariably affects the other as every individual member of society, including myself, is constituted in, and by, the wider socio-cultural context. I have been interested in gender and sexuality since studying psychology at undergraduate level. My introduction to the psychology of gender and sexuality was through the lens of social constructionism and any other approach I have come across since has seemed wanting in some way; I chose to use a social constructionist epistemology in this research to further my own understanding of the approach.

Part of my drive to understand the socio-cultural discourses of heterosex is because I am embedded in these discourses as much as my participants and these discourses affect me on a personal as well as a professional level. As such, this research was about me as much as it was about my participants; I wanted to understand the process of my own negotiation of the dominant discourses of heterosex and to be clearer about my own positioning both personally and professionally. In line with Butler (1990), I assume that there is no core biologically driven gender or sexual identity but rather that gender and sexuality are produced by a social process that perpetuates dominant ideas and concepts of gender and sexuality. Butler (1990) referred to this process as 'performativity' and argued that normative gender is maintained and reproduced by socially driven performativity of it. However, with a continual perpetuation of versions of reality, change becomes possible through the process of disconfirming and resisting current versions of reality – a process Butler (1990) termed 'deconstruction'. This research was designed to contribute to the process of deconstructing

dominant discourses of heterosex and uncovering the hegemonic structures inherent in current meanings of gender and sexuality.

As a relational psychologist, I assume, as Khan (2006) suggested, that the relationship between the therapist and client *is* the therapy; the therapeutic relationship is built through the interaction of therapist and client and the quality of the interaction invariably depends on the therapist's self-reflective ability. As therapists we have 'blind spots' in our work that, by definition, will remain unexplored. A social constructionist lens has the potential to broaden the remit of our reflection as therapists and will hence increase the quality of the therapeutic relationships (Hare-Mustin, 1994).

I am hoping that this research will contribute to raising counselling psychologists' awareness both of social constructionist ways of understanding people and therapy and the value of becoming aware of the discursive forces that powerfully perpetuate certain versions of the world as more truthful than others. If we, as counselling psychologists are to implement the professional practice guidelines as set out by the BPS (2005) for our discipline, it is my view that we need to engage with the social, cultural, historical and political locatedness of the cultural landscape in which we practice. We need to develop frameworks to understand the dominant structures and socio-political forces that underpin and promote the interests of the powerful (Burr, 2003), and to find ways of recognising and naming discursive forces that are difficult to detect and resist. We also need to appreciate the urge to conform and adhere to normative behaviour that ultimately serves to perpetuate culturally and politically dominant structures (Foucault, 2003, 1980).

Results

The results are reported under four main headings: (1) Depictions of masturbation; (2) Depictions of reactions to masturbation; (3) Depictions of sexual experimentation; and (4) Depictions of reactions to suggestions of sexual experimentation. Following the main analysis there will be a comparative section focusing on the overall differences in the responses of the therapist and non-therapist participant groups across both data sets entitled: Comparing the differences between therapists’ and non-therapists’ responses and lastly there will be a section on participant gender differences across the whole sample entitled. The depictions of masturbation and sexual experimentation are discussed as four subthemes each (see Table 4).

Table 4: Analytic subthemes of the depiction of masturbation and sexual experimentation

Depiction of masturbation as:	Depictions of sexual experimentation as:
a) better than coitus	a) A demonstration of being normal
b) Chris ‘doing his bit’	b) as a bargaining tool
c) stress relief	c) an attempt to restore lost sexual excitement
d) an educational experience for Emily	d) an attempt to address power imbalances

The depictions of the reactions to finding a partner masturbating or to a partner suggesting sexual experimentation was discussed under two main emotional responses: Excitement and Anxiety (see Table 5).

Table 5: Analytic subthemes of the representations of emotional reactions in the stories

Depiction of reactions to finding a partner masturbating:	Depictions of reactions to a partner suggesting sexual experimentation:
e) Anxiety	Anxiety
f) Excitement	Excitement

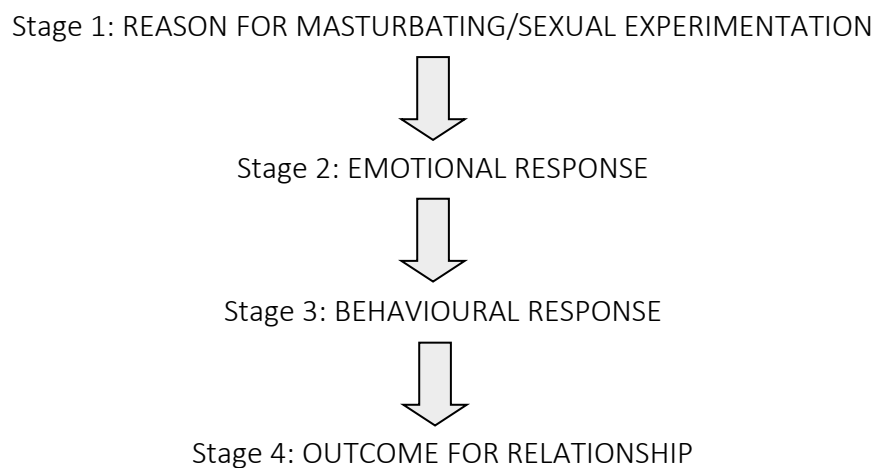
In accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2013) guidelines for thematic analysis, each story may contain more than one theme.

Grammatical and spelling errors have been corrected in the data to aid readability and comprehension; the use of '[...]' signals editing of the data to remove superfluous text. Data extracts are tagged with the following information: Participant number (ranging from 1-110), sex (F-female, M-male), profession (T-therapist, NT-non-therapist,) and version of the story as set out in Table 6 below:

**Table 6: Different story versions with their data tags**

Masturbation Story (M)	Sexual Experimentation Story (SE)
<b>Chris Version (MC):</b> [...] One night Emily finds Chris masturbating...	<b>Matt Version (SEM):</b> [...] tonight Matt suggests trying something new...
<b>Emily Version (ME):</b> [...] One night Chris finds Emily masturbating...	<b>Sarah Version (SES):</b> [...] tonight Sarah suggests trying something new...

The majority of the stories followed a linear narrative pattern based around providing a reason for masturbation/sexual experimentation, an emotional response from both characters and commonly, a behavioural consequence. Participants also often commented on the outcome for the relationship (see Figure 4):



**Figure 4: Linear Narrative Pattern of Story Completions**

There was considerable variation in the time frame covered in the narratives following the cue. Whilst most stories kept to a 24-hour time frame, some stories gave extensive descriptive detail of a few moments whilst other stories spanned several years. Just under a third of the stories included additional characters in the form of children, friends, ex-partners and additional sexual partners.

### **Depictions of Masturbation**

Masturbation was depicted in diverse and conflicting ways. Overwhelmingly, masturbation was presented as a threat to heteronormative conceptualisations of gender roles, particularly because it was seen to circumvent a coital imperative, and thereby render the roles of women as sexual enticers and men as sexual providers, redundant. To manage

this threat, participants constructed stories within a heteronormative framework, by making gendered interpretations of masturbation. Participants attached different meanings to Emily's masturbation compared to Chris' masturbation. Overall, masturbation was made sense of in 4 main ways:

(a) *Better than coitus*: Thirty-six percent of the masturbation stories (N=100) presented masturbation as better than coitus. Of these, 22% (N= 36) depicted Emily as masturbating as a way to compensate for the lack of sexual fulfilment through coitus. The other 14% (N=36) depicted Chris as preferring masturbation by presenting the meeting of Emily's sexual needs as tedious and 'getting in the way' of true expression of male sexuality.

(b) *Chris 'doing his bit'*: Forty six percent (46%, N=50) presented Chris's masturbation as a way to control his sex drive and constructed masturbation as him 'doing his bit' for the greater good of the relationship.

(c) *Stress relief*: Sixteen percent (16%, N=100) constructed both Emily's and Chris's masturbation as a stress reliving strategy.

(d) *Educational Experience (Emily Only)*. Sixteen percent of stories about Emily (16 %, N=50) depicted Emily's masturbation as an educational experience (Figure 3).

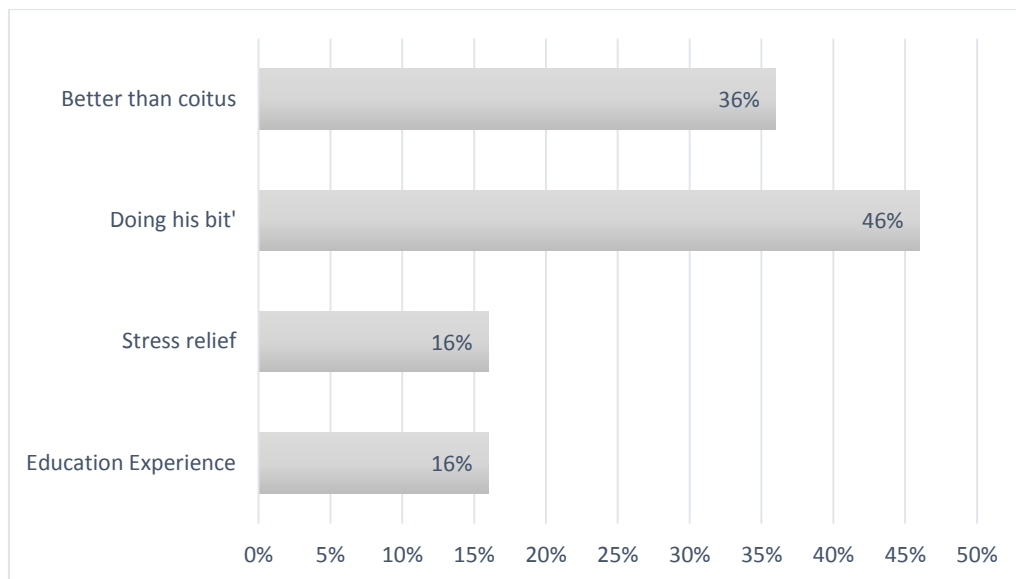


Figure 5: The meanings of masturbation

The analysis will focus on each of the different ways of making sense of masturbation in turn.

**(a) Masturbation as better than coitus.** Masturbation was depicted as a more effective way of experiencing pleasure than coitus for Emily (22%, N=50) and Chris (14%, N=50). Emily was presented as masturbating to compensate for a lack of pleasure during coitus:

‘[Emily] has been masturbating to achieve orgasm ... something which she doesn't get when having sex with Chris. [...] She has decided that it's easier to pleasure herself than to spend time pleasuring Chris and not getting any pleasure in return.’ (67FTME)

‘Emily finds that she is unable to climax through full penetration but is worried to tell Chris and decides that she will continue to masturbate and make herself feel good.’ (32FNTME)

Even though masturbation was presented as more physically pleasurable than coitus it was depicted as only a compensatory practice (Langstrom & Hanson, 2006). Emily was

depicted as 'suffering in silence' (101MTME) and 'securing her orgasms' (95MTME) through masturbation in order to manage her frustrations at the lack of pleasure she experiences through coitus. Emily's 'sacrifice' of accepting unsatisfying sex can be regarded as an example of the social expectation of women to take responsibility for the 'emotion work' in heterosexual relationships (Gavey et al., 1999; Hochschild, 2012b; Hollway, 1989). As such, Emily was positioned as having to accept unsatisfactory coitus for the 'greater good' of the relationship:

'[Emily] decides that she will continue to masturbate and make herself feel good on her own and that she will have sex with Chris but not reach climax but instead enjoy the foreplay and intimacy that they share.' (32FNTME)

The relatively submissive stance ascribed to Emily positions her as succumbing to Chris's sexual demands and forfeiting some of her own pleasure. Female sexual submission has been historically explained by the grip that the have/hold discourse has on gender socialisation (Hollway, 1984). Tolman (2012) argued that women's prescribed gender role to primarily 'have' and to 'hold' relationships is conducive to environments in which women, in fulfilment of their gender role, may be pressured into unwanted sexual contact. In this scenario the decision to cease 'pleasuring Chris' was, in many cases, linked to relationship breakdown, for example: 'Emily can't be bothered to do something, she gets nothing out of, so stops having sex with Chris, that is the end of the relationship' (11FTME). This draws on a discourse which regards women's availability for coitus as essential to the continuation of the relationship (Potts, 2002)

Fourteen percent of the stories focused on Chris' masturbation also presented

masturbation as more physically pleasurable than coitus. The reasons given for Chris's preference also centred on the negative impact that pleasuring someone else has on one's own experience of sex. In one story it was explained that: 'When he's stressed he doesn't want to consider her or worry about her pleasure' (13FNTMC). Consistent with popular representations and understandings of women's sexuality (Barker 2013c), and echoing the findings of existing research (Braun et al., 2003; Frith, 2013; Nicolson & Burr, 2003), Emily's sexual needs were presented as elusive, complex and difficult to meet: 'to be honest Emily, I find it stressful, I need to be the right kind of sensitive, the right kind of forceful, the right this and that for you to come, it's hard to keep up, I just want to go for it' (61MTMC). Sexually satisfying Emily was not only regarded as a more complex task than satisfying Chris, but also as requiring greater investment, but Chris was presented as feeling responsible for meeting Emily's sexual needs. As such, Chris's masturbation was presented as Chris 'taking a break' from meeting Emily's sexual needs:

'He also, if he was really honest, liked the 'selfish' part of masturbation where he could just focus on relaxation and his own enjoyment without having to focus on Emily's enjoyment first.' ..(74MTMC)

Emily's sexual satisfaction is presented here as getting in the way of the pursuit of men's sexual gratification. In fact, as the extract below reveals, it is difficult if not impossible to combine 'conscientiousness', 'skill' and 'consideration' with 'lovemaking' if sex is to truly please a man:

'He looks lost in his own pleasure with an abandon that she knows is hard for him to give in to when he's trying so hard to be a conscientious, skilled and

considerate lover with her. So often he seems so focused on her and has frequently stated that seeing her feel good is what makes him feel good. (She often ends up feeling quite a bit of pressure in that regard--somehow her orgasm isn't just for her--it's to reassure him that he's done a good job and that she's happy and satisfied.) So now, here he is-lost and going for it on his own.' (112FTMC)

This story draws on a male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984), which positions men as becoming overwhelmed with desire. The 'conscientious' lover is depicted as having to work hard to resist being overwhelmed in order to continue to pay attention to his partner. Pleasing a woman is thereby presented as hard work.

**(b) Masturbation as a way for Chris to 'do his bit'.** Forty-six percent of stories about Chris presented his masturbating as a strategy to manage the demands placed on Emily by his sex drive. Chris was routinely presented as having a higher sex drive than Emily and sex with Emily was depicted as not sufficient to satisfy his need. For example, Chris's masturbation was generally made sense of as a response to an absence of opportunities for sex with Emily: 'Chris would actually like to have more sex with Emily, but doesn't want to wake her up to ask for sex when she is sleeping' (79MTMC). Chris was therefore positioned as a caring and loving 'modern man' who does not want to 'pester' Emily for sex, and therefore masturbates as a way to manage his sexual needs:

'He frequently masturbated to his favourite films when he knew Emily would not be at home. It was harmless; it hurt no one and for him, he felt, it was essential in maintaining his and Emily's relationship because his sexual drive was higher than hers and he did not want to pressurise her.' (74FTMC)

By presenting Chris as relieving Emily of her duties to cater to his sexual needs, this story draws on a discourse that implicitly positions women as holding responsibility for men's sexual gratification (Hollway 1984, Sunderland, 2004). Furthermore, the depiction of Chris' masturbation as an expression of his commitment to his relationship with Emily, frames any objection to this practice as putting the relationship in jeopardy. For example, 68% of the stories about Chris' masturbation depict him as consuming pornography (this is discussed in greater detail below). The consumption of pornography is constructed as eliciting difficult feelings in Emily, ranging from unfavourable comparisons to the women on screen - 'does he prefer these girls to me?' (13FNTMC) - to feeling that this practice challenges her political views: 'how audacious! You know full well how I feel about the production and consumption of these films!' (19FNTMC). Because the consumption of pornography is seen as central to men's masturbation, and if masturbation is framed as 'doing his bit' in ensuring the continuation of the relationship, a challenge to pornography consumption would destabilise the relationship and hence be counter intuitive to a commitment to 'have/hold' the relationship. It can therefore be argued that framing masturbation as 'doing his bit' serves to powerfully mute a discourse around the effect of men's consumption of pornography on women, or what the practice means for their political views.

**(c) Masturbation as stress relief.** Sixteen percent (N=100) of the stories constructed masturbation as a 'natural' bodily function; this depiction was more common in the stories written by therapists. Furthermore, while Emily was more likely to be presented as masturbating to release general stress and tension, Chris was more likely to be presented as masturbating to relieve *sexual* tension: 'The lack of release had built up to unbearable levels

of tension. He masturbates to relieve stress' (99MTMC). The tendency to position Emily's masturbatory practice as non-sexual perhaps reflects difficulties with regarding women as sexual agents in pursuit of their own pleasure (Jackson, 1984): 'She explained that she had had a tough day and was feeling stressed and had decided to do so to help her to relax before he came home' (73MTME). This reframes the sexual aspect of Emily's masturbation as a 'mood management strategy' to allow her to receive Chris with a more balanced disposition.

Similar to Emily masturbating to manage her frustrations about absent orgasms in coitus, she is also presented here as using masturbation to manage her emotions. Masturbation in both cases thereby becomes a strategy to have/hold Chris by ensuring she is in the right frame of mind to engage with him (Hollway, 1984). The extract below not only presents Chris's sexuality as fundamentally different from Emily's but assumes that this is the case for all men and all women:

'Thing is Emily, its different for men. We feel horny and coming is just a mechanical thing, a way of releasing tension. Not that different to eating when hungry really' (89MTMC).

What becomes undoubtedly clear from participants' conceptualisations of masturbation as a stress relieving strategy is that reliving stress through masturbation has very different meanings for men and women. Whilst the participants located men's stress relief in a biologically based sexuality, women's stress relief was made sense of in terms women's emotional states. This again can be interpreted as a general denial of an active female sexuality, thereby re-inscribing the notion of a female sexuality that is organised in

response to male sexuality (Cacchioni, 2007; Hollway, 1989; Jackson & Scott, 2001; Tyler, 2004).

**(d) Masturbation as an educational experience.** In the stories written about Emily masturbating, 16% (N=50) constructed masturbation as an educational experience. These stories drew upon on pro-masturbation ideas that position masturbation as a 'healthy', 'natural' and 'necessary' method of exploring one's body and that suggest an association between masturbation and sexual self-esteem (Coleman, 2003; Hogarth & Ingham 2009; Kaestle & Allen 2011; Stein, 2012). For example:

'Emily had always masturbated, ever since she was a young girl, she felt it helped her be more confident and enjoy sex with men more as she got to learn what she liked.' (63MTME)

Whilst becoming confident and knowledgeable about one's own body is generally positive, the discourses that underpin sexual confidence in women are often underpinned by traditional heteronormative values (Watson & McKee, 2013; Stein, 2012). For example, both male and female participants presented Emily as masturbating as a way to increase her coital expertise and to learn about her body.

'Emily was comfortable sexually; she had always masturbated so knew her body well, which helped when she had sex with men to get the most out of it'.  
(106FTME)

The extract above not only reinforces the relationship between masturbation and coital expertise, but suggests that women benefit from equipping themselves with

knowledge about their bodies to ensure coitus is pleasurable. Framing masturbation as an educational tool designed to increase coital pleasure implies that coitus is not expected to be a naturally pleasurable experience for women (Watson & McKee, 2013; Stein, 2012).

Women's pleasure is thereby seen as an optional rather than necessary by product of coitus. The importance of coitus is thus re-inscribed and the responsibility of experiencing physical pleasure through coitus is placed onto women.

Thus, it is apparent that the meaning of masturbation in the stories was highly gendered. While men's masturbation is largely made sense of as a means to meet otherwise unmet sexual needs, women's masturbation is understood as a strategy to increase women's competence and capacity to pleasure men, thereby firmly grounding women's masturbation in relation to a have/hold discourse that posits the securing of a long term monogamous relationship as the primary goal of women (Potts, 2002; Hollway, 1989).

### **Depictions of Reactions to Masturbation**

Participants presented the discovery of a partner's masturbation as evoking three main emotional responses: excitement, anxiety, or a combination of both. Excitement usually led to the desire to 'join in', which in some stories led to sexual contact between the couple. The anxiety described in the stories tended to be either depicted as resulting in aggressive or shaming exchanges between the couple (you are masturbating because you are disgusting/immature etc.), or in terms of self-doubt and judgment directed at the self (he/she is masturbating because I cannot sexually fulfil him/her). Some stories described only one of the above emotions and others included both. This led to different outcomes in the stories,

ranging from sabotaging a partner's pleasure to relationship growth through conversation (see Figure 6).

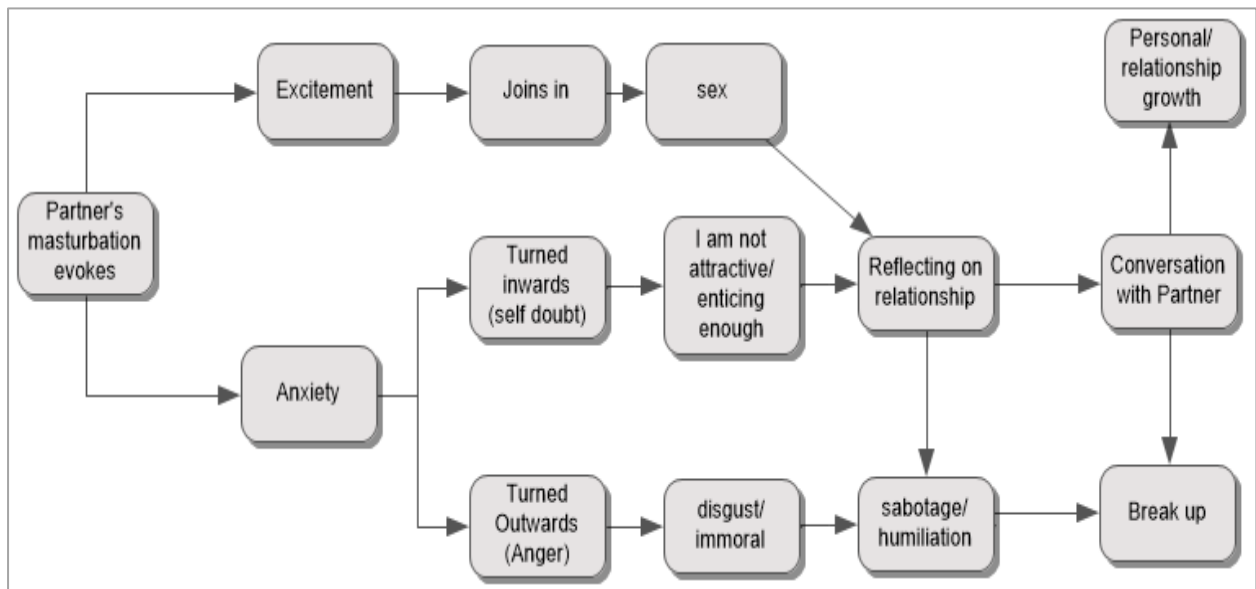


Figure 6: Narrative possibilities within the masturbation story completions

Chris was slightly more likely to be depicted as sexually excited as well as anxious, while Emily was more likely to be presented as anxious than sexually excited. Male participants were twice as likely to position Chris as anxious in response to Emily's masturbation and female participants were twice as likely to position Emily as anxious in response to Chris' masturbation. Male participants were more likely to ascribe Emily an angry (active) response, while female participants were more likely to ascribe her a sad (passive) response. As such, male participants attributed greater agency and power to Emily than female participants did. Emily and Chris were equally likely to be presented as embarrassed when found masturbating. However Emily's masturbation was depicted as more than twice as likely to evoke an arousal response in Chris as Chris' masturbation did in Emily. Twenty-four percent of stories (N= 51) turned Emily's masturbation into a performance of seduction

for Chris. No story about Emily's masturbation mentioned pornography compared to 69% of stories about Chris (N=50).

**Evoking Excitement.** Whilst Chris was presented as becoming excited by Emily's masturbation in stories written by male and female participants, only female participants wrote stories in which Emily was excited by Chris's masturbation. Chris was seven times more likely to be depicted as having an excited response than Emily and stories about Chris' excitement were more likely to end in mutual sex acts, including coitus, than stories about Emily's excitement. Emily's excitement in response to Chris' masturbation was less likely to find sexual expression and more likely to end in her depicted as feeling frustrated:

'As Emily pretends to be asleep thinking about what this means, she listens and becomes aroused herself. Gently she moans and moves closer to him so their bodies are touching. But Chris has already climaxed and fallen asleep. Emily is left feeling frustrated.' (29FNTMC)

'Emily sees Chris through the slightly ajar bedroom door muscles flexed cock in hand, she notices herself becoming excited and as she ponders about joining in Chris comes, cleans himself up, picks up the book he had left on the bed, the moment has passed.' (16FTMC)

In this and in other stories, Emily was presented as less forthright about 'joining in', more reflective about the situation as a whole, and as 'missing the moment' to get her sexual needs met. By contrast Chris was depicted as more upfront about his needs in the stories where Emily's masturbation evoked sexual excitement; he did not dwell on his feelings of

anxiety, but proceeded to pursue his own sexual gratification. In comparing instances of excitement evoked in one partner through the masturbation of the other, Chris was presented as encountering fewer barriers in the pursuit of his own pleasure than Emily. This can be understood in terms of Hochschild's (2012b) concept of emotion work, which refers to women's tendency to manage the equilibrium in relationships by suppressing their own emotions. So in instances where Chris' masturbation evoked excitement as well as anxiety, Emily was more likely to be depicted as attending to the anxiety than her own sexual excitement. On the other hand, Chris' attention to his own sexual needs is routinely depicted as uncomplicated and straightforward:

Emily was lying on the bed spread out, hands in knickers, Chris instantly felt turned on and went over to join in the action. (73MTME)

Positioning Emily's masturbation as a 'turn on' for Chris removed the focus on Emily's pursuit of sexual pleasure and relocated Emily's sexuality in heteronormative discourses that organise women's sexuality around men (Hollway, 1989). Framing Emily's masturbation as sexual enticement reinforces the notion of Emily's sexuality as primarily functioning to excite Chris (Potts, 2002; Hollway, 1989). Furthermore, this depiction draws on the heteronormative understanding of women as the object of men's desire, whereby a woman evokes uncontrollable sexual urges in a man who subsequently 'ravishes' her (Gavey, 2005; Potts, 2002). When Emily failed to accept Chris's advances in the stories, Emily was positioned as pushing Chris into infidelity (as opposed to holding him in a monogamous relationship with her), which served to offload responsibility for Chris' infidelity onto Emily,

something previously noted in story completion research on infidelity (Clarke et al. 2015; Whitty, 2005; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995):

‘Emily looks shocked and embarrassed that Chris caught her having a wank. He tries to go over to have sex with her because it turns him on, but Emily is too embarrassed. [...] Angry, Chris goes off and sleeps with another girl. [...] Emily knows that it was to do with her just wanting to get her rocks off, but had always felt guilty about it. She brushes the question away and they eventually ends their relationship. Emily is left in tears wondering what went wrong.’ (75MTME)

The participants also drew on a male sex drive discourse to make sense of Chris’ responses to Emily’s masturbation. For example, when Emily’s masturbation evoked reflections in Chris about his shortcomings in pleasing her, he ignored them as he became increasingly sexually aroused. In this sense Chris was presented as having his cognitive functions temporarily impaired by overwhelming sexual excitement, thus his ability to make rational reflective decisions was discarded in favour of the pursuit of sexual gratification. Chris’ original considerations of Emily’s feelings are therefore overridden by his sexual urges. Only after Chris’s sexual needs have been met was he able to return to consider Emily’s needs:

‘He immediately feels a mix of conflicting emotions - arousal at her pleasuring herself [...] He briefly considers whether he should pretend that he is still asleep and 'leave her to it' - or whether he should join in. Mulling this over, he becomes increasingly turned on by the thought of watching her masturbate while he pleasures himself. [...] Ultimately, he wants to have penetrative sex. She agrees, and they

proceed to have sex. Sometime afterwards, he wonders if there is some need that he isn't meeting in her, but doesn't feel confident asking her about this in case the answer that he gets is one that he doesn't want to hear.' (84MTME)

'He is excited by what he sees [Emily masturbating] and becomes hard. [...] Emily helps undress Chris and they end up having sex. A few days later Chris wonders whether Emily often masturbates when he isn't around and that she may prefer this to sex. He wonders if he makes her climax through penetration.' (20FNTME)

In response to the discovery of Emily masturbating, two male therapists provided a reason why Emily's sexual needs have not been met in the past; Chris thought she didn't have any:

'Chris is surprised he thought Emily didn't masturbate. [...] Chris decides to be more sensitive when attempting sexual contact, now he knows Emily has some sexual desires.' (95MTME)

'Emily was not even a very sexual being; at least that was what he had thought.' (94MTME)

The above extracts unambiguously position Emily as the object of Chris's sexuality. The writers suggest that Emily's 'absent' sexuality justifies Chris's previously 'insensitive' approach to initiating sex.

***Performing masturbation as a way to evoke excitement.*** The absence of a pleasure driven female sexuality, is evident throughout the data in more subtle ways. Twenty-eight

percent of the stories framed Emily's masturbation as a way to entice Chris. In this sense masturbation, which elsewhere in the text posed challenges to heteronormativity due to its un-reciprocal nature, is reframed as the heteronormative practice of women performing sex acts in order to evoke men's attention and desire. In these stories, upon discovery, Emily typically turns her masturbation into a sexual performance for Chris. Emily's masturbation is thereby contained within dominant heteronormative discourses that position women as the providers of sexual stimulation for men. Emily's pursuit of her own pleasure is thereby turned into a seductive performance for Chris and thus male heterosexuality is (re)prioritised:

'Emily continues to masturbate and to seduce Chris. [...] He seems to be getting into Emily's performance and getting aroused.' (106FTME)

'Emily moves to the drawer and reaches for her vibrator, turns it on and continues the performance. Chris feels an almost unbearable amount of tension in his pants. [...] Emily knew he was a sucker for her moans and was purposely groaning in pleasure loudly for his benefit.' (19FNTME)

Two stories written by male therapists framed the purpose of Emily's masturbation as sexual enticement from the outset. This means that rather than Emily being depicted as meeting her own sexual needs, her masturbation is depicted as a strategy to evoke excitement in Chris, either because he had requested her to masturbate or as a way to seduce him, which she does despite being uncomfortable:

'Chris cannot believe his eyes (or his luck) to finally find his partner masturbating! [...] Chris had repeatedly asked Emily to masturbate in front of him as

part of their sex but Emily was always too embarrassed and had declined. She knew though that it was something that would turn Chris on and so decided to surprise him one night. [...] This night she left work early, showered and got herself into bed ready for when Chris came home.’ (82FTME)

‘When the couple are next kissing in their bed Chris asks Emily to touch herself although unsure she does this.’ (66FTME)

An account of female sexuality that is independent of men’s sexuality is entirely absent in the above extracts. The purpose of Emily’s masturbation is depicted as primarily for Chris’ enjoyment, thereby reinforcing the notion that the main objective of female sexuality is to evoke sexual responses in men (Gavey et al., 2003; Hollway, 1989). It may be argued that this functions to restore the status quo that is potentially threatened by Emily’s masturbation.

**Evoking Anxiety.** In a considerable number of stories partner masturbation was depicted as evoking an anxious response. Throughout the data ‘ideal’ heterosex was constructed as something that should be reciprocal, whereby both parties hold complementary roles that both enable as well as police the other’s access to sex (Braun et al., 2003). Chris was framed as the gate keeper of sexual pleasure, whereas Emily was presented as responsible for sexual enticement (Hollway, 1989). The participants related the anxiety depicted in the characters either directly or indirectly to the challenge masturbation poses to the fulfilment of their prescribed gender roles. Chris was depicted as being most hurt about the fact that he ‘is unable to sexually gratify Emily’ (63MTME), which represents sex as something that needs to be given to women. On the other hand, Emily was depicted as most

hurt about being replaced by pornography: 'your partner does not find you attractive, so much so that he has to resort to porn?' (74FTMC). The purpose of Emily's sexuality is presented as being bound up with evoking sexual excitement. As such, both characters are depicted as responding, to varying degrees, by feeling threatened, redundant or replaced:

'What could he have been doing wrong to make Emily need to do this without him? Can he bring this back or is it that he have lost her for good? Chris decides that he has to do something about this because this is not right. He is the man of the house and he should be the one making his partner feel sexually aroused and if he cannot do it then what good is he in this relationship.' (42MNTME)

'Emily is shocked and slams the door. She runs downstairs to the lounge. She feels embarrassed and humiliated - if Chris was horny why didn't he just become sexual with her?' (103FTMC)

In one story Chris was portrayed as attempting to regain his position as the provider of sex by forcing Emily to have sex with him: 'he eventually makes Emily have sex with him, this makes him feels better for a little while (42MNTME). The importance of abiding by gender roles is therefore presented as pivotal in sexual encounters. As such, sexual practices present an opportunity to demonstrate gender role adherence and can therefore be regarded as an essential component in reinforcing and perpetuating prescriptive conceptualisations of gender roles.

***Pornography evoking anxiety.*** None of the stories presented Emily as masturbating to pornography, compared to 69% of the stories (N=51) that presented Chris doing so. This

served to construct Chris's masturbatory practices as linked to the consumption of pornography. The presence or absence of pornography in the stories appeared to act as a mediator of the response evoked in Emily. In the stories in which Chris was using pornography, Emily was presented as comparing herself unfavourably to the women in the videos and as more likely to regard Chris' masturbation as evidence of her shortcomings in failing to excite him, than in the stories where Chris did not use pornography :

'She feels that when Chris looks at porn and masturbates, that this is a sign that Chris doesn't find her very attractive.' (79MTMC)

'Was he attracted to her? Bored of her? What was porn giving him that she couldn't? She had fairly low self-esteem about her appearance and would often find her confidence in her sexual relationship with Chris affected by this.' (44MNTMC)

Emily's role as enticer of male desire was presented by both male and female participants as being threatened by Chris' consumption of pornography. The perceived threat of pornography to the relationship seemed to be justified in some stories, because Chris was presented as preferring masturbating to pornography over sex with Emily, primarily because it is easily available, more exciting and difficult to resist:

'The films offered him an outlet and more adventure than sex with Emily ever could.' (74FTMC)

'The only reason he'd tried it was that Emily was so preoccupied with work nowadays so she was always busy and when they were together she was tired so their sex life had become boring and limited.' (38MNTMC)

One of the ways participants suggested that Emily could regain her position as the sexual enticer was to dress and act like the women represented in pornography. The positioning of pornography as more effective in eliciting sexual responses in Chris, affords pornography a position of power and authority (Attwood, 2005). Interestingly, only female participants constructed pornography as a legitimate source of knowledge about how to entice/excite Chris. Overall, Emily is represented as six times more likely than Chris to seek out information and advice about more effective ways to fulfil her role as a sexual partner:

‘Emily was thinking about how she could win back Chris’s attention, she trawled through his search history to see what kind of stuff he was into...handcuffs and whips, I can do that she thought and made a mental note to get some on her way home from work’ (39MNTMC).

‘I [Emily] think we should get some new underwear, some toys and maybe watch porn together’ (89MTMC).

This approach reflects the advice given in lifestyle magazines that encourages women to dress or interact with men in ways that promote sexual desirability (Durham, 1998; Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998), and to become more sexually skilled to please and retain their partners (Favid & Braun, 2006). The need for sexual skill and competence was generally expressed in the stories through the inclusion of more varied sex acts such as experimenting with props/toys, watching pornography and engaging in female initiated sex (Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008):

‘I promise to be faithful to you [not masturbate to pornography], if we were

having regular sex but it's bloody difficult when we haven't slept together for 2 months!' 'What can we do about it?' 'I think we should get some new underwear, some toys and maybe watch porn together, I don't mind lots of foreplay, in fact I enjoy it.' (89MTMC).

Rather than depicting the couple as exploring why their sex life is unsatisfying, the solution for absent sex within the relationship is located in what Frith (2013) termed a 'consumer ethic', in which 'sexiness' is embodied and presented through the consumption of the 'right' objects – such as sex toys or lingerie. Although in some ways the stories positioned women as actively involved in pursuing sexual goals, the goals remain tied into evoking male sexual excitement through aesthetic appearance. Whether enhancing appearance or deploying further sexual skills and techniques, generally Emily's tactics were presented as successful in regaining Chris' attention:

'Chris is on the lounge sofa masturbating to porn on his laptop. Emily is back from work but Chris has his headphones on. [...] Without saying a word to Chris Emily hurries to the bedroom, puts on Chris' favourite lingerie and stands in the door frame. Chris' eyes catch her... at first he is frightened, then embarrassed, then delighted. Emily crawls towards Chris on hands and knees, needless to say the porn is soon forgotten' (39MNTMC).

In two thirds of stories about masturbation the partner ends up 'joining in'. When Chris 'joins in', all of the stories cited 'overwhelming sexual excitement' as the reasons for his behaviour. This compares to 27% of stories about Emily that provide no reason at all for Emily joining in. It is not made explicit why 'Emily puts on lingerie and crawls into the room' and

very few stories cite 'overwhelming sexual excitement' as a reason for Emily to join in. In instances where Emily's thoughts and feelings *were* included in the narrative, Emily is presented as joining in out of guilt:

'She wonders if he is hoping she will wake up and feel turned on, and get involved. Unfortunately she doesn't feel like that, she feels a bit put out and not quite sure how to react now that she is fully awake. [...] Finally she decides she should try to help him out, as lying beside him doing nothing is not making her feel very good.'

(27FNTMC).

Here Emily is not driven by a pursuit of her own desires but rather by a feeling of obligation to rectify perceived shortfalls within the relationship that are understood to be expressed through Chris's masturbation.

**Conclusion.** Overwhelmingly, masturbation was presented as a potential challenge to heteronormative ways of making sense of sex, relationships and intimacy that had to be incorporated back into heteronormative discourses. Chris and Emily were presented as holding different but complementary roles and responsibilities, which served to monitor and police each other's access to sex as well as endorse a coital imperative. Chris's role was primarily depicted as the provider of sex and Emily's role was frequently depicted as the enticer of sex. Masturbation was largely presented as a way to compensate for unmet sexual needs and as providing evidence of the shortcomings in the other partner's fulfilment of their role. Emily was presented as more likely than Chris to respond to criticism by reflecting on her own failings and feeling guilty, and was more likely to be depicted as trying to regain Chris's attention. Chris' feelings of guilt were presented as often overridden by sexual

excitement, and Chris was presented as more likely to have his sexual needs met. Overall Emily was presented as holding both responsibility for the smooth-running of the relationship and managing Chris' emotional and sexual needs, often at the expense of her own. Chris' sexuality on the other hand, was overwhelmingly depicted as biologically driven, which constructed Chris as at the mercy of his sex drive and unable to control his sexuality to meet Emily's needs.

Pornography occupied a contested space within the stories; it was constructed as Emily's competitor for Chris's attention, as more easily available, more exciting and more difficult to resist than Emily. However, Female participants presented pornography as a legitimate source of knowledge for Emily to draw on, in order to regain Chris' attention. Unlike Chris, Emily was presented as having a plethora of strategies available to her to enhance her sexual competence, using props and lingerie. This suggests that the meaning of masturbation is gendered and that access to pleasure for men and women is represented as dependent on the parameters of their prescribed gender roles.

### **Depiction of Sexual Experimentation**

This analysis will focus on the meanings attributed to the suggestion of 'something new'. Instead of increasing sexual pleasure directly, sexual experimentation was overwhelmingly made sense of as a vehicle to obtain social goals. Thirty-four percent of stories referenced popular media and pornography as legitimate sources of information about sex and presented sexual experimentation as an aspiration in intimate relationships. Furthermore, sex was primarily depicted as a skill that can, and should, be worked on to improve competence (Cacchioni, 2007; Jackson & Scott, 2001; Tyler, 2004). The four main

ways that sexual experimentation was constructed are outlined below:

(a) *A demonstration of being normal*: Forty eight percent of the sexual experimentation stories (48%, N=100) presented sexual experimentation as a necessary demonstration of 'being normal' (Tiefer, 2008), even when neither partner reported feeling particularly dissatisfied with their existing sexual practice.

(b) *A bargaining tool*: Twenty-one percent (21%, N=100) of the stories framed the suggestion of sexual experimentation as a direct bargaining tool to secure further social goals or to be asked for as payment for other acts of services already supplied (i.e: domestic work, financial security etc.)

(c) *A way to restore lost sexual excitement*: Nineteen percent (19%, N 100) depicted sexual experimentation as way to restore lost sexual excitement.

(d) *A way to address power imbalances*: Sixteen percent (16%, N=50) of the stories written by women about Sarah's suggestion of sexual experimentation, or her reaction to Matt's suggestion, presented Sarah's suggestion as an attempt to 'make things fair' and 'equal' between the couple, not necessarily as a way to increase Sarah's sexual pleasure. (see Figure 6 below).

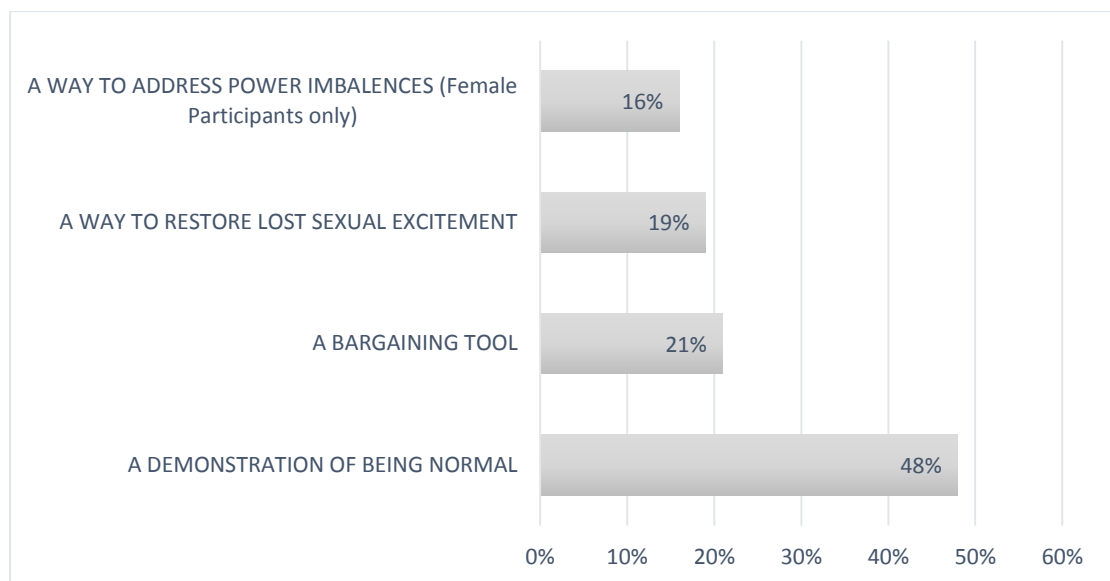


Figure 7: The meanings of sexual experimentation

**A demonstration of being normal.** Forty-eight percent of the stories depicted sexual experimentation as an expected part of ‘good’ sexual practice. ‘Vanilla sex’ (sex that is deemed conventional by contemporary culture) was regarded as undesirable and dull whereas Kink/BDSM and pornographic sex were depicted as aspirational goals for Matt and Sarah. This may suggest a reorganisation of what Rubin (1984) described as the ‘Charmed Circle’ of sexuality; sex acts previously deemed to be in the ‘outer limits’ of sexuality (manufactured objects, threesomes etc.) were frequently suggested as an expected part of sexual practice. In fact, Martin (2013) observed soaring sales of BDSM-lite product following the release of the Fifty Shades tribology (E.L. James 2011, 2012) which can be interpreted as evidence for the cultural change in sexual practices that is driven by a desire for social cohesion. Whilst the criteria of what constitutes ‘charmed’ may have been overturned, the desire to be ‘charmed’ persists. Indeed, in many stories Matt and Sarah are presented as suggesting the ‘rudest thing’ they can think of despite feeling ambivalent or uncomfortable

about doing so. For example, Sarah offered a 'tit wank', as it was the rudest thing she could think of' (69FTSES), and Matt agreed to Sarah's request of using whips as 'he didn't want to appear boring' (81MTSES). The attempt to squeeze into a particular conceptualisation of desirable sexuality can be understood as the need to be perceived as 'normal' (Tiefer, 2012).

Whilst destigmatisation of BDSM and kink serves to alleviate associated stress for people engaged in these sexual cultures (Taylor & Ussher, 2001), it may also be seen as setting a new benchmark for normative (hetero)sexual practice, and therefore places additional expectations onto heterosexual couples (Barker, 2013b; Weiss, 2006). Indeed, engagement in adventurous and exciting sex acts was regarded as a universally accepted marker of 'good' sex. In that sense, sexual experimentation can be seen to provide Sarah and Matt, both as a couple and as individuals, with a way to signal and perform their normality. The extracts below illustrate that despite being content with their sexual routine, both Matt and Sarah seek to alter their practice following an unfavourable comparison to others. Little reference was made to how sexual experimentation may increase their own pleasure and satisfaction:

'Sarah was always talking to her friends about what they were getting up to sexually. She found that her and Matt's relationship was rather dull compared to theirs so suggested to experiment' (55MNTSES).

'Matt has been talking to his friends who regularly have sex with a number of different partners; they have told Matt about the performance of their sexual partners and Matt is therefore keen to try something new with Sarah. Sarah has also spoken to her close friends about her sex life and her friends have encouraged Sarah

to be more adventurous [...] Matt and Sarah try something out that Matt has heard his friends talking about and seen on the Internet.' (83MTSEM)

Both extracts show how other people's practices of sex were presented as directly impacting on the couple. By using 'friends' as a plural it gives the impression that the wider collective is engaging in particular sexual practices and this serves to normalise these practices. The desire to be part of this collective and be 'normal' was depicted as overriding previous sexual satisfaction. This need to conform to socially set ideals has been depicted as driving Sarah to suggest sex acts which she perceives 'all men love' (13FNTSES) as a way to keep Matt's attention. For example: 'Sarah suggests they should try anal sex [...] partly because she thought that men in general liked to have anal sex' (54MNTSES). The motivation for Sarah to introduce anal sex into their routine was not to increase her own pleasure but to increase her ability to satisfy Matt: 'She wanted to please her new partner whom she was beginning to fall in love with' (54MNTSES). This participant positioned Sarah's suggestion as a way of showing her love for Matt. In so doing, the story reinforces the idea that satisfying male sexual desire is a central tenet of women's role in heterosexual (Tiefer 2008). Sarah's concern was presented as primarily about how her suggestion may affect her value as a sexual commodity: 'she began to think that perhaps Matt had not done anal sex before and she began to worry that he might think she was dirty or slutty' (54MNTSES). This story was underpinned by the idea that the same sexual request can both increase a woman's value (she is adventurous) and decrease it (she is dirty, slutty); Matt 'started to feel slightly uneasy at the thought of his girlfriend having anal sex with previous partners, as a consequence Sarah was beginning to regret making the suggestion' (54MNTSES).

Similarly in another story, when Matt suggests anal sex Sarah doesn't consider this on the basis of whether it will give her pleasure but on the basis of increasing or decreasing her

value as a sexual commodity to Matt: 'he has heard that it is good and just about everyone does it [...] She can't see how anal sex will bring her any pleasure and she's worried about hygiene issues [...] Matt tells her not to be silly [...] he loves her and he thinks the view will be 'hot'.' (13FNTSES)

Matt's offer of reassurance 'the view will be hot' is misplaced as Sarah did not voice any anxiety about her appearance. While Matt is portrayed as being patronising and dismissive of Sarah's worries about hygiene, his offer of reassurance suggests that Sarah's appearance during sex acts is important. His sexual curiosity about something that 'he heard is good' (13FNTSES) appears to take precedence over Sarah's concern. This may be understood within a heteronormative framework that assumes men want sex and women want relationships (Potts, 2002). Both, Matt and Sarah are portrayed to understand these to be exchangeable commodities, whereby sex or certain sex acts may be offered or requested in exchange for relationship security:

'Sarah agrees to try it so long as he goes slowly and stops if it is too painful- Sarah is surprised that it didn't hurt as much as she thought but she didn't really enjoy it. 'She's worried Matt has really liked it and will want to make it a regular activity in their sex life. She asks Matt what he thought. He tells her it was okay, not really as good as he'd hoped. Sarah feels like she's done something wrong, like perhaps she didn't do it right. She hears that all men love anal so she worries that something went wrong for Matt to say he 'could take it or leave it'' (13FNTSES).

The participant told a story in which Matt's sexuality is prioritised, by suggesting that Matt's experience of pleasure is a legitimate reason for Sarah to consent sex acts which she

anticipates may be painful. Sarah is constructed in a lose/lose position as she is worried both about Matt liking it and at the same time not liking it. Because he did not '*really*' like it:

'She feels' irrationally violated, like she consented to something she didn't want, just to make him happy, and he doesn't even appreciate it. They decide not to have anal sex again in the future. Sarah can't stop worrying that Matt is not satisfied with their sex life so she makes sure he knows that she's still open to trying new things.' (13FNTSES)

Matt is positioned as not only 'needing' sex, but also 'deserving' pleasure. This has been termed the 'double standard' that 'subordinates women's sexuality to that of men' (Jackson & Cram, 2003: 115; see also Hite, 1988). Sarah is presented as 'irrational' for feeling violated, since she consented to the sex act. Indeed, she may not have felt violated if he had been more appreciative. The pleasure gained from pleasing Matt would have therefore made it a worthwhile endurance. It is only in the absence of Matt's pleasure that Sarah's reward fails to manifest, thereby drawing attention to her 'poor' investment. Indeed preserving the role of the enticer is Sarah's main objective. In the extract below Sarah is depicted as rejecting the idea of anal sex not because she will not find it pleasurable but because Matt may change his mind about it and find it 'rubbish':

'If it is rubbish we'll just won't do it again? If it is rubbish? Sarah thought, are you joking? The only reason why it would be rubbish if you suddenly get turn off because it becomes apparent to you that your face is in a place you would only see if you lived inside a toilet, that's why. And once the disgust is planted there is no going

back that would be it, we could never see each other again.....one of us would probably have to leave town....what a stupid idea' (26FTSEM).

This shows that Sarah takes account of all of Matt's possible future feelings when deciding to accept or reject the suggestion of a sex act. Disgust is presented as a plausible outcome which, once evoked, is feared to permeate his perception of and feelings about her. This highlights the importance attributed to Sarah's potential to evoke sexual excitement in Matt and that once reduced may diminish Sarah's ability to 'have' and 'hold' Matt and therefore threaten the future of the relationship.

**Sexual experimentation as a bargaining tool.** Twenty one percent of the stories understood the suggestion of sexual experimentation as a direct bargaining tool to secure further social goals. The idea of bargaining sex for physical, emotional or economic security is not new (see Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Thompson 1992). Historically, sex has been regarded as a tool that allows women to become agentic within their own lives, and assume power in social domains which otherwise may be difficult to access (Wolf, 1993). In the data, the link between sex and other acts of service is also evident. Matt was described as connecting his lack of contribution to domestic chores and Sarah's willingness to engage in sex, drawing on discourses of sexual reciprocity (Braun et al., 2006), whereby sex is offered as a reward:

'Matt knew that he was not the best at getting around to the household chores which frequently meant that Sarah was left to get on with these by herself. He began to think that maybe their style of sex suited him more. Tonight Matt suggested they started with a soak in the bath. He would bathe her, and then massage her using the oils. She had been trying to tell him he needed to be helping her more recently,

and she had not made it so easy for them to have sex. Sarah wondered whether Matt was just trying to get them back to having regular sex or could she hope that he was showing her that he could take care of her generally?' (102MTSEM).

Sarah's reluctance to have sex was presented as an expression of her dissatisfaction with Matt's failure to meet his domestic responsibilities. 'Regular' sex was presented as the 'wham bam style' that suits Matt more, and attending to Sarah's needs was presented as not part of their usual sexual routine. By increasing the effort Matt is putting into pleasing Sarah, he is increasing his bargaining power, and can therefore ask for more in return. Similarly, the principle of reciprocity allowed Matt to demand certain sex acts of Sarah, as he felt his 'investment' in the relationship awarded him a greater sexual mandate:

'She accuses him of taking advantage of her when she is drunk. He tries to make up excuses but it's half-hearted. It transpires that he feels he was within his rights to push for anal as he had made a lot of sacrifices to be with her. Sarah loses trust in Matt and their sex life gets worse and worse. Finally, she leaves him.'

(89MTSEM)

The idea that Matt was within his rights to take advantage of Sarah was questioned in this story by positioning Sarah as losing trust in Matt and leaving the relationship. Sarah was presented as resisting an understanding of sex as an exchange of services (i.e. Matt's investment vs. Sarah's agreement to anal sex). In another story Sarah is also faced with the dilemma that she may be jeopardising the continuation of the relationship by resisting Matt's sexual demands:

‘The following week [...] Sarah saw some porn on Matt's computer; pretty hard stuff really. Now she was worried that maybe Matt was getting obsessed with sex and that she was going to either learn to love it or leave the relationship. Sarah and Matt were going to have to talk about this.’ (5FNTSEM)

Whilst Sarah and Matt representation as having ‘to talk about this’ suggests that sexual preferences are negotiated in relationships, Sarah’s depiction of having ‘to have to love it or leave’ suggests that there is little room for negotiation. This begs the questions of how fruitful such negotiations may be, if ultimately Sarah will be presumed responsible for the breakup of the relationship if she does not ‘learn to love it’. When, on the other hand, Sarah wishes to include new sex acts into their sexual routine, Matt’s ambivalence stops her from pursuing her demands:

‘Matt went on thinking they had a great sex life, but Sarah kept wondering if there was more they could do to take it to the next level. On occasion she suggested some other things, but it was never met with an enthusiastic response and Matt was never the one to suggest anything new. They went on like this as there was nothing wrong with their sex life, but Sarah wasn't completely satisfied.’ (11FNTSES)

Sarah was depicted as accepting unsatisfying sex rather negotiating her sexual preferences with Matt and depicted as suggesting ‘something new’ primarily for Matt’s benefit rather than her own. Matt’s sexual tastes dominate what happens between the couple sexually. This reinforces the idea that female sexuality is tied to male gratification (Gavey, 2005, Potts, 2002). In the following story Sarah is seen to be managing Matt’s sexuality in favour of attending to her own needs:

‘Sarah looked inquisitive but was inwardly hesitant. She knew this had been coming, she had felt this latent distance growing between the two. She had tried to compensate by physicality, overt acts of sexually provocative behaviour, and it had worked. Or at least seemed it worked. He came quickly, he was turned off. But afterwards the lull remained. She held her cards close to her chest’ (38MNTSEM).

Sarah was presented as managing the ‘lull’ by offering sex as a distraction for Matt. Sex is thereby used as a tool by Sarah to mask the emotional distance between the couple. In fact the depiction of sexual experimentation as a tool to bargain with was common. However, while Sarah was more likely to be depicted as utilising the offering and withholding of sex to secure wider social goals (e.g increase her own desirability), Matt was more likely to be depicted as asking for sex acts in return for other acts of services, such as domestic work or financial contributions.

**Restoring lost sexual excitement.** The majority of the stories presented the quality of sex as *the* marker of relationship quality. Thus, the stories were underpinned by an assumption that changes in the characters’ sex life are related to the changes that occur within the relationship over time. Nineteen percent of stories suggested that ‘trying something new’ would restore lost sexual excitement. Thus, returning to an earlier state in the relationship, by ‘having sex like we used to’ (76MTSEM), was expressed as a desirable goal. This draws on the idea perpetuated by popular sex advice that the quality of sex in relationships reduces over time (Harvey & Gill, 2011). Thus sex becomes both a mediator and a moderator of relationships, whereby having a certain kind of sex, or a particular frequency of sex, reflects a decline in the quality of the relationship. The idea of reintroducing sexual

excitement through Matt and Sarah role playing strangers, thereby positioning predictable sex and familiar partners as boring: 'Matt says 'let's pretend we are on a first date, like a blind date together,' Sarah's eyes widen and she says 'yes', there is an immediate spark.

(80FTSEM)

However, some stories present a more nuanced explanation of the decline in the quality of Matt and Sarah's sex life. In response to Matt's attempts to 'inject a new lease of life' (63MTSEM) into their sex life, Sarah feels that the reason why their sex life has decreased in quality is because there is an unequal exchange of services between herself and Matt. Indeed she 'stopped having sex with him as a way to show how pissed she was' (102MTSEM) about the unequal division of labour in their household. Being unable to agree, they eventually split up and find more compatible sexual partners:

'It goes downhill from here and they eventually go through a very expensive and painful acrimonious divorce. When he has recovered, he has a string of girlfriends whom he showers with gifts who have all the kind of sex he wants plus he is not so tired anymore. Sarah starts a relationship with a Mexican art student 20 years her junior they have wild and passionate sex, and Sarah asks for nothing.' (29MTSEM)

Sarah is seen to achieve a more fulfilling sexual relationship when 'she asks for nothing' in return for sex. This reflects the notion that women rely on sex as a bargaining power when other sources of power may be denied to them (Potts, 2002; Thompson, 1992). Similarly Matt has a more fulfilling sex life when the 'showering of gifts' can be exchanged for 'all the kind of sex he wants'.

**Addressing power imbalances through sexual experimentation.** While heterosexual relationships have been identified as a primary site of women's oppression by some feminist scholars (e.g. Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994; MacKinnon, 1987), and heterosexual desire has been regarded as eroticised power difference (Jeffrey, 1990), it is important to identify instances where hegemonic heteronormative sense making is resisted, particularly, if feminist research is to serve any emancipatory agenda (Hockey et al., 2007). In the stories written by women where Sarah suggest 'something new' sexual, 16% of stories evidence resistance of the 'have/hold' discourse by drawing on discourses of reciprocity when making sense of either Sarah's sexual request or her response to Matt's sexual requests. Indeed, the engagement in sex acts is also seen as an important vehicle for producing egalitarianism within relationships, as well as a mechanism through which power may be redistributed. For example, Sarah assertively states that she is willing to engage in anal sex, not because she wishes to, or because he has asked her to, but because it allows her to make the same request of him. Sarah's willingness to agree to anal sex is therefore conditional:

'He should also be penetrated by her with a dildo. Matt is shocked and says he is not curious on anal because he is not Gay and that he has no interest in being penetrated. Sarah laughs and says she did not think only gay men could enjoy anal sex, that she thinks it is a matter of equality in sex - if she does that for him then he should also do that for her, which requires similar preparation (condom use, lubricant, relaxation and confidence in the other). Matt spends some weeks without

mentioning it and then he admits it is a matter of justice and equality and that he never thought she would ask him that.' (78FTSES)

'He's suggesting they assume a bit of role-play and that she takes on a role where she's a bit subordinate and he's the boss. She laughs a bit, in a good hearted way. But she suggests actually that she be the boss and he's the one who is a bit subordinate, and she suggests in fact that he's very subordinate, and will need to do exactly what he's told, or he'll be in trouble.' (6FNTSES)

The frequency of the depiction of sexual relationship without a pleasure narrative is striking. Sex is regarded as a site where equality can be negotiated. Sarah insists on what is framed as an 'equal exchange' of sex acts as a way to produce equality in the relationship. Similarly the following story resists the common use of an active male and passive female narrative (Jackson, 1995) by depicting a mutual and simultaneous use of the vibrator. The focus here again, is the equal distribution of power through the suggestion of simultaneous access to pleasure:

'[Matt] reaches down under the bed to bring out a shiny metal vibrator [...]

'Well come on', says Sarah, 'switch it on and let's see what it does, they both become more aroused, they stop giggling, and with Matt and Sarah lying side by side, share the vibrator moving it between penis and clitoris to bring them both to a warm, all enveloping, intense climax.' (2FNTSEM)

Other instances of resisting a more passive representation of women include a depiction of Sarah as a 'femme fatal' with hidden and 'dark' sexual desires. Concurrent with

classic conceptualisation of 'la femme fatal' (Allen, 1983; Bru-Dominguez, 2009), Sarah is presented as a mysterious and seductive woman whose charms ensnare her lover Matt, leading him into compromising and dangerous situations:

'Sarah explains that she gets off on having sex in public places, saying that the higher the risk of being caught by someone the better. Although Matt has little experience of this, he finds Sarah so exciting that he agrees in an instant! [...] before Matt knew it he had started dogging with Sarah with other people in the park, Sarah's lust for risk had increased to taking drugs to enhance her orgasms and having unprotected sex with strangers. Matt knew this was wrong, and noticed a change in Sarah. Her moods changed on a daily basis, from being excessively clingy to pushing him away. Matt was torn by what was right morally and his love for Sarah.' (86FTSES)

Sarah's suggestion of something new is framed as leading to 'dark and dangerous' places, that put herself and Matt as well as their relationship at risk. Sarah pursuit of her sexual desires is depicted as impacting on her mental health, and her ability to make rational decisions is represented as significantly impaired. The presentation of women as a 'femme fatal', positions men as victims of their sexual charms, which serves to offload responsibility for subsequent sexual acts. The idea of 'la femme fatal' is underpinned by a Virgin/Whore binary (Denmark & Paludi, 1993), which regards female sexuality either in terms of its reproductive purpose or as an object of male desire, thereby limiting the range of female sexual expression (Ussher, 1993, 2006).

### Depictions of reactions to the suggestion of sexual experimentation

Like the reactions depicted in the masturbation stories, partners were depicted as having two main emotional reactions to a suggestion of something new: excitement and anxiety. Anxiety took two forms, firstly, directed towards the self and expressed as self-doubt and insecurity, or directed at the other, expressed as shaming of the other and acting aggressively. Some stories linked the expressed emotion specifically to the sex act that had been suggested. For example, the character is excited by suggestion of trying something new but are disgusted by the specific sex act suggested. Or they were anxious about trying something new but became excited when they learnt which specific sex act had been suggested. Whilst most stories specified what the 'something new' was, some did not provide any details, referring instead to 'the new thing' throughout the story.

There were various ways that anxiety was managed in the stories, either through retracting the suggestion, ending the relationship, proceeding with the sex act despite discomfort or, in the case of Matt, reducing anxiety through physical stimulation. See Figure 8 for an overview.

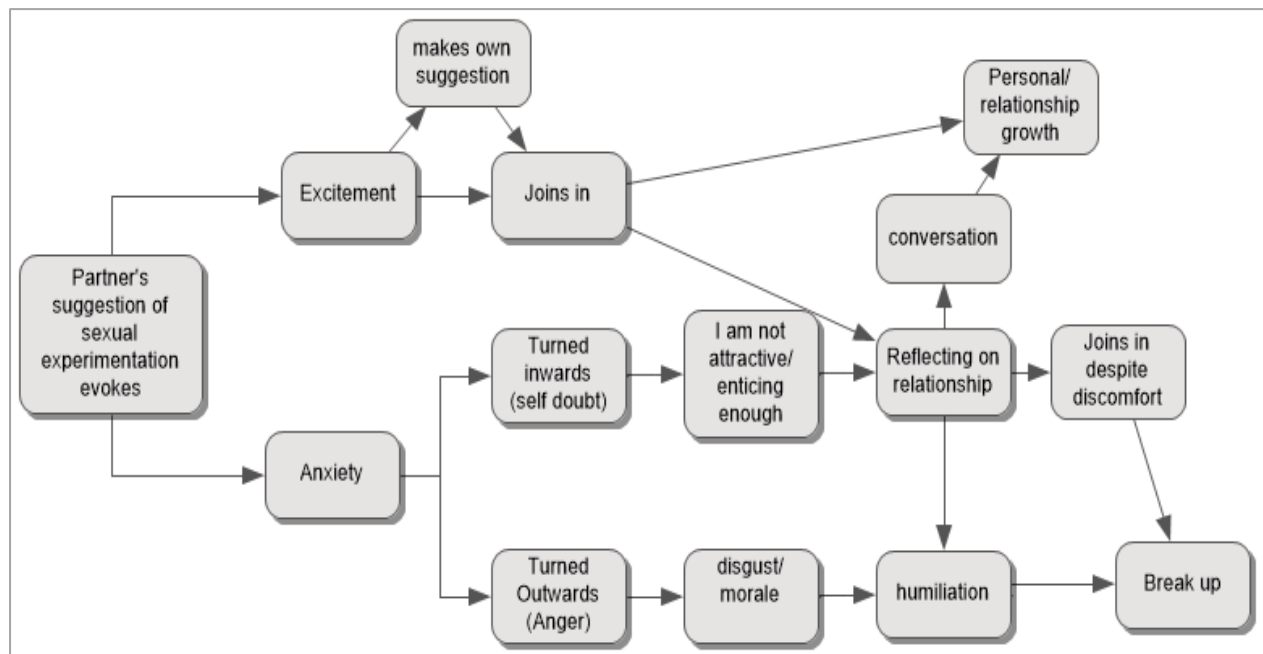


Figure 8: Narrative possibilities within the story completions (sexual experimentation)

**Evoking Anxiety.** While the suggestion of something new was as likely to be depicted as evoking feelings of anxiety in both Sarah and Matt, Matt was four times more likely than Sarah to respond angrily and voice his anger, and Sarah was three times more likely to respond by doubting and keeping her feelings to herself. These responses are illustrated below.

Matt's anxiety response:

'Matt begins to worry, "what could she possibly mean?" he thought. We've only ever had normal sex, oral, and hand jobs and we've started dirty talking but I don't know what else to do...maybe I can't satisfy her (60FTSES).

'Matt feels mortally wounded [...]: 'I suppose your last boyfriend made you cum no problem!' The arguments continue' (111MTSES).

Sarah's anxiety response:

'She wonders if Matt is bored with her. Bored of having sex with her. Bored of her body. Bored of what she has to offer him. She wonders if [...] Matt had become entranced by online porn. Specifically by cam girls, girls who would do almost anything Matt asked them to do'. But she could bring herself to talk to him (108FTSEM).

'What was Matt really saying? 'Doesn't he like what I do?', 'He doesn't fancy me any more... it's because I've put on weight...', 'he's bored and thinks I am fat...' 'he's going to leave me' '...He's having an affair... it's with that stuck up cow down the street...' 'I knew it!' A thousand and one thoughts raced through Sarah's head... 'Sarah... earth to Sarah... Darling, are you all right?' 'Yeah, I'm fine' she said and smiled nervously' (105MTSEM)

In the stories that depict Sarah as suggesting sexual practices that involve additional partners Matt is depicted as having strong polarised reactions depending on the gender of the suggested partners. While Matt is furious about including additional men into their sexual practice and vehemently refuses to consider Sarah's request, his request of including additional women is accepted by Sarah. These responses are illustrated below.

Threesome suggested to Matt:

'He heatedly explains that he 'can't believe that she suggested this. Getting angry herself, she says, 'Ok, so it's fine that you get to talk about your sexual fantasies of women dressed as schoolgirls all the time - but it's not fine for me to talk about

mine?! How hypocritical is that?!' He responds by saying: 'Well, at least it doesn't involve me having sex with another man! I'm not some fuckin' faggot!' She explains that he isn't 'having sex with another man, but having sex with her'. At the same time, she can tell that he has gone into 'one of his moods', and won't talk further about this.' (84MTSES)

'He demands to know what Sarah is playing at and storms out of the bedroom. Sarah follows him looking bemused, 'I thought you were into the idea of a threesome she asks?' 'Yes' replies Matt but not with him 'I mean not with anyone... I mean another guy'. His anger is subsiding and he feels quite vulnerable and upset 'you deceived me' he mutters as he leaves the house. Over the next few weeks Sarah tries to contact Matt a few times, but he never returns her calls.' (97FTSES)

Threesome suggested to Sarah:

'What do you reckon? 'Another woman!' Sarah thought 'omg I have never done this before, part of her was curious, 'it might be in one of those music video, super sexy! He won't forget me then' she turned to him and said: 'can't wait''. (112FTSEM)

What is clear from the above extracts is that a threesome with two women is more acceptable to Sarah than a threesome with two men to Matt. Gentry (1998), who wrote extensively about the 'double standard', contended that society applies different rules to women than to men when it comes to sex. While the term was originally used to describe harsher judgments about women's promiscuity, it is now seen to apply to the expression for

women's sexuality more generally, and more specifically the prioritisation of men's sexuality over women's (Attwood, 2007). It may be suggested that changes in the perception of what is considered 'charmed' in terms of Rubin's (1989) theory of sex, may apply more to women's sexual practices than men's. Matt is presented as being offended by Sarah's suggestion and as thinking that she may assume that he wants to have sex with other men. The idea of two women involved in a sexual act is presented as a 'super sexy', 'unforgettable' experience, which echoes the pornographied representations of female intimacy in sexualised mainstream media (Attwood, 2006). Unlike Matt, Sarah is expected to censor her tastes to comply with Matt's idea of sex, thereby drawing on a view of sexuality centred on male needs.

In the stories that presented Sarah and Matt as anxious about being perceived as prudish or inexperienced, they were equally likely to be presented as 'going along' with what had been suggested and not discussing their anxiety. However Sarah's (15%, N=50) depiction as inexperienced outweighed Matt's (4%, N=50):

'Sarah at first feels a little bit nervous about the idea of something new. She wonders whether she has been doing something wrong up to now. As this is a new relationship she does not want to openly air these views as she is concerned that she will look inexperienced or like a prude. Matt is more experienced than Sarah and this suddenly runs through her mind. She nods her head in agreement and Matt gets very excited. Suddenly images of 50 shades of grey crosses her mind and she panics. The way she felt must have been clear to Matt as after a few minutes of awkward fumbling he pulls away and looks at her inquisitively. What wrong? He says, I thought

you were up for this? Sarah agrees and makes a conscious effort to pretend she has done this before.’ (98FTSEM)

Matt was not keen on trying this, in fact it made him uncomfortable as he had not tried it before, but he also didn’t want to come across as a killjoy, and make Sarah bored of him, so he went along with it without saying anything’ (92FTSES).

**Evoking Excitement.** Similar to Chris’ representation as biologically driven to pursue his own sexual gratification when he sees Emily masturbating, Matt’s sexuality is equally constructed around biological imperatives in the sexual experimentation stories. In the stories in which Matt was presented as uncomfortable with the suggestions made by Sarah, he was swiftly put at ease through physical stimulation. In the same way that Chris’ concerns over his relational shortcoming were overridden by his sexual arousal, so is Matt’s apprehension disposed of, when Sarah physically stimulates him:

‘Matt was feeling anxious but was soon able to relax when Sarah put her hand over his crutch to massage his manhood’ (93MTSES).

‘Matt regards the box tentatively, unsure now whether he really wants to open it. Sarah reaches out, touching his stiffened penis, using her familiar, expert movements. The familiarity and sensuality of her movements reassures Matt as his arousal surges within him. He quickly lifts the latch and opens the box....’ (92FTSES).

Depicting Matt as driven by his biological urges serves to position men as victims of their biology, thereby removing their responsibility for the possible consequences of the pursuit of their sexual gratification (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Hollway, 1989; Jackson, 1984). In

contrast, Sarah's sexual excitement, like Emily's, was routinely made sense of in terms of her ability to evoke excitement in Matt.

Thirty percent of female participants constructed their understanding of Sarah's sexuality as a performance for Matt. In these stories, Sarah was depicted as experiencing heightened pleasure from filming sex acts as well as performing role-plays. For example, Sarah suggests role playing that she is a sex worker: 'She wants him to knock on the door, and she will let him in, all dressed up. She will perform and he will pay' (21FNTSES). It is suggested that Sarah's pleasure is increased through performance: 'Sarah much preferred her sex to have a performative quality, she felt it heightened her pleasure' (1FNTSEM). This may be understood in terms of what Gill (2012) refers to as the subjectification of women. She argues that women internalise the objectifying male gaze that permeates a hypersexualised culture, making it difficult to resist self-objectification. Although less apparent, the stories also contained an alternative discourse around performance and pleasure. These stories suggested that the imperative to perform sex, rather than experience it for oneself, gets in the way of experiencing pleasure. In a story which suggests that Matt and Sarah switch roles, Sarah is presented as notably relieved, as being a woman is seen to conflict with the experience of pleasure: 'I am up for changing roles, then I can focus less on being sexy, and actually enjoy sex' (24FNTSEM).

**Conclusion.** Both Matt and Sarah were depicted as under considerable pressure to adhere to social and cultural standards of 'normal' and 'good' relationships. Adventurous sex was predominantly framed as 'good' and 'normal' and the suggestion of sexual experimentation was a vital tool that allowed the characters to perform normative sexual

identities. By making a suggestion to try something new, Sarah and Matt are often depicted as eliciting considerable anxiety in each other, especially in instances where one partner feels uncomfortable about what has been suggested. Both Sarah and Matt were presented as feeling pressured not to appear unadventurous to their partner.

The tendency to construct sex as a social commodity that yields bargaining power was visible in all the stories. The offering and withholding of particular sex acts was presented as performing significant social functions in the character's desire to appear normal and socially desirable. Sex was thus constructed as a currency that can be exchanged within a relationship for other commodities. A distinct group of stories, written by women, use sex as a site to negotiate Sarah's equal access to power and use sexual experimentation to redress imbalances. In instances where Sarah is depicted as pursuing pleasure freely, this is regarded as compromising her mental health and jeopardising her relationship. This suggests that representations of sexual experimentation carry multiple meanings across different contexts. The negotiation of these meanings can complicate people's access to their own pleasure.

What has become apparent through the analysis of the responses to suggestions regarding new sex acts is that these are far from straightforward. The representation of characters' negotiation of sexual practice in the stories appeared to require careful navigation through heteronormative scripts that govern intimate relationships and set relational parameters (Barker, 2011b; Kleinplatz, 2001 Potts, 2002). Whilst some sexual experimentation evoked excitement, the suggestions of new sex acts was often portrayed as inducing anxiety in a partner, as it was mostly understood as a response to a failure to adequately stimulate the partner who made the suggestion. Anxiety was either turned

inward and manifested as self-doubt and insecurity or turned towards the partner as aggression and anger. The data showed that men were more likely to be depicted as blaming others (outward anger) and women were more likely to be depicted as blaming themselves (inward anger). This is consistent with common understandings of constructions of gender that tend to offer women a passive subject position and men an active one (Jackson, 1993). Furthermore, the stories commonly depicted Sarah and Matt as sexual commodities with bargaining power. Sexual experimentation was therefore depicted as an aspirational social goal and a way to increase one's social desirability. Characters were depicted as proceeding with sexual experimentation despite discomfort, as a way to hide anxiety. Having focused on the narrative difference in the depictions of the characters in the stories, I now turn to the difference between the different groups writing the stories. First, I will look for trends across both stories in the way therapists construct their narratives compared to people who have not been therapeutically trained. Following this analysis will be a section on the main differences between the stories written by men to those written by women.

### **Comparing Therapists' Responses to Those of Non-Therapists**

The therapists largely drew on the same oppressive discourses as the participants who had not been therapeutically trained. However, there were some differences in the stories written by the two groups. Whilst therapists' conceptualisations of masturbation and sexual experimentation were mostly heteronormative, they framed the reactions of the characters in the scenarios in markedly different ways from non-therapists. As a result therapists' stories differed on various levels. Firstly, therapists tended to write stories that were more emotionally complex. For example, the characters tended to go through greater

emotional variation; from initially experiencing two or more emotions (often conflicting) to being depicted as undergoing emotional change as the narrative develops, and usually arriving at an entirely new emotion towards the end of the story. The process by which the character's emotions shifted was through internal dialogue. Unlike the stories written by non-therapists, the therapists' stories commonly advocated communication, and often depicted it as a gateway to improved relationships. As such therapists' stories included more direct speech and depicted both characters' internal thoughts to a greater extent. Therapists' stories not only constructed communication as an important component in people's relationship, but also constructed more positive outcomes through effective communication. For example, in the non-therapists' stories, communication is more likely to lead to arguments, whereas communication in the therapist stories is generally depicted as leading to increased intimacy and greater depth in the relationship:

Therapists' depiction of communication:

'They are both more open about their needs, sexual or otherwise, and agree that this has probably saved their relationship.' (33FTCM)

'Together Emily and Chris begin to talk about sex properly for the first time. They share their early memories of sex and what that meant to them. Gradually they begin a relationship that is based more on honesty rather than assumption and their sex life become slowly more adventurous as Emily gets in touch with her sexuality and Chris stops trying to second guess what she might want.' (110FTCM)

Non-therapists' depiction of communication:

‘Talking was getting them nowhere, it went on and on and eventually what had been a minor glitch, was turning into a huge melodrama’ (19FNTMC).

‘They tried to talk about it but as usual things were turned and twisted began to cause a rift between the two’ (18FNTME).

The above extracts also demonstrate that the challenge that was evoked by masturbation or sexual experimentation was framed as an opportunity for relationship growth or a turning point for the couple. Stories written by therapists were three times more likely to depict challenges as opportunities than non-therapists:

‘Since that day their sex life together, which used to be tame, has gotten much more interesting and more intense’ (69FTME).

‘This helps the relationship to grow stronger and both are open to trying new experiences in the future.’ (83MTSEM)

While therapists generally regarded relational difficulties and challenges as yielding the potential for greater interpersonal depth they were also more likely to include opposing viewpoints in the story:

‘She tells them what happened and how out of order Chris is. Her friend Kate sympathises with her, saying that she should have it out with Chris - he is totally out of order for not asking if she wanted to have sex. Her other friend Jemma is incredulous!! So what!!?? Masturbation is totally normal and doesn't mean he doesn't find her attractive or that she's bad in bed - what the fuck century are you in?

Jemma tells Emily that if she'd have walked in on her boyfriend masturbating she would have joined in with him. Jemma can't believe the way that Emily and Kate are reacting. Jemma wanks a lot. And loves it.' (103FTMC)

Holding multiple view points in the story also allows the writer to take a more detached position from the narrative. Detachment could be regarded as a way of safeguarding the therapists' professionalism. One therapist made it clear that he was 'borrowing' the narrative from a client who had presented to therapy with a similar situation: 'this parallels the narrative of a female client I am working with' (111MTSES). Holding a removed position may be understood as a manifestation of therapists' professional training, which advocates a detached, self-controlled stance in trainees (Feltham, 2007). Similarly, synonymous with the clinical competencies of therapists, therapists' often gave a 'formulation' for the character's behaviour. For example, therapists, unlike non therapists, sought to explain the character's behaviour through previous life events. Emily was depicted as reserved due to her 'Christian background' (110FTME) and 'upbringing as a Catholic' (111MTME). Matt's shyness was related to growing 'up as an only child of conservative parents' (110FTSES), Sarah's forthrightness was explained by 'her parent's liberal attitude towards sex' (87FTME). This not only provided richer accounts of the characters but also served to signal further the therapist's removed position and professional approach to completing the stories.

The differences in the stories written by the two participant groups were especially apparent in the therapists' sense making around relational problems and difficulties. Therapeutic training and practice revolved around finding creative and meaningful solutions

to the difficulties people present with (Johnstone & Dallos 2014; Tribe & Morrissey, 2015).

The close link between the core attributes of therapeutic training and the distinct features of the therapist's stories suggests that they drew on their professional skills and experiences to make sense of the characters' relationships. Professional training may give therapists access to broader discourses around relationships, problems and difficulties (Moon, 2011).

Subsequently the lack of training in sexual issues and the absence of a critical understanding of sex impacts equally on the range of discursive possibilities available to therapists in their sense making of sex. It therefore follows that offering therapists' critical frameworks for making sense of heterosex, would potentially increase therapists' discursive repertoire and foster a more nuanced understanding of how heteronormativity continues to perpetuate constraining and oppressive practices of gender expression.

### **Comparing Men's Stories to Women's Stories**

Unlike Frith (2013) and Clarke et al. (2015) who failed to find a relationship between the gender of the participants and the narratives in the stories as outlined by Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) and Whitty's (2005), this study found that gender impacted on the use of discourse. The most notable differences were observed in the depictions of the emotional reactions ascribed to the characters in the stories. While men and women were just as likely to construct sexual experimentation as a demonstration of normality, a bargaining tool or an attempt to restore lost sexual excitement, only female participants made sense of sexual experimentation as a way to address power imbalances inherent in sexual relationships. In these stories, sexual experimentation was presented as an opportunity to induce the same level of discomfort in men that women experienced as a result of men's sexual requests. For

example, Sarah was depicted as willing to agree to anal penetration despite anxiety around this practice on the basis that she could anally penetrate Matt also. Women's preoccupation with justice in their negotiation of sex acts can be understood in terms of what Hare-Mustin (1991) term 'marriage-between-equals discourse' to describe a social imperative for women to present their relationships as equal. Decisions that are organised by a 'marriage-between-equals discourse' prioritise the appearance of equality over other personal goals (e.g. pleasure, intimacy, etc.). Dryden (1999) argued that this veneer of gender equality is often pursued with such rigour that actual inequalities get overlooked. This is also true for the characters in the stories; the concern with making Matt as uncomfortable as Sarah overrides the importance of exploring Sarah's discomfort, thus creating a defeatist subjectivity in which 'real' equality is regarded as an unattainable goal and 'quasi' equality is accepted instead (Hochschild, 2012a). Such accounts of heterosexual paint intimate relationships between men and women more in terms of a battleground than in pursuit of a level playing field.

Women's use of sex as a tool to gain power and agency is not new. It can be seen both as a reminder of a time when women were largely excluded from other platforms of personal influence and as a product of the third wave 'power feminism' embodied by writers such as Denfeld (1995), Paglia (1992) and Wolf (1993). 'Power feminism' has been understood as the antidote to the conjectural lack of agency of second wave 'victim feminism', that are considered as embodying the polarised feminist positions of the sex wars (Segal, 2004). However, in the case of the stories outlined above Sarah is described less as the, 'free-thinking, pleasure-loving and self-assertive' (Wolf, 1993, p. 181) feminist that Wolf envisaged when she offered her account of 'power feminism' and more as someone who is

willing to forego their own pleasure and indeed take on discomfort for the sake of proving a point.

The impact of gender was particularly evident in participants' depictions of the emotional reactions of the characters to both, the suggestion of sexual experimentation and finding their partner masturbating.

For example, while 17% of female participants wrote stories in which Emily became excited upon finding Chris masturbating, 'as Emily pretends to be asleep she listens and becomes aroused herself' (29FTMC), while none of the male participants did. Similarly, male participants presented an angrier Emily, 'Emily is shocked, furious and very disappointed. She quizzes him about what is going on' (89MTMC) than female participants did. Both male and female participants suggested that Chris's masturbation would elicit self-doubt in Emily, 'was he bored of having sex with her. Bored of her body. Bored of what she has to offer him' (108FTSEM). Moreover, female participants wrote about self-doubt in Emily more often than male participants.

Similar differences were found in the representation of Chris' emotional reactions to Emily's masturbation. While both male and female participants wrote stories in which Emily's masturbation elicited excitement in Chris, female participants were over 20% more likely to attribute excitement to Chris. Female participants wrote a small amount of stories where Chris was angry with Emily for masturbating, 'Chris is angry that Emily did not come to him to satisfy her needs' (23FTME), while none of the stories written by men entertained anger as a plausible response. Similarly, male participants were twice as likely as female participants to represent Emily's masturbation as eliciting self-doubt in Chris, 'he was worried that Emily

would become bored of their relationship' (47MTSEM). See Table 7 for a breakdown of participants' representations of emotional reactions by participant and character.

**Table 7: Emotional Responses to partner's masturbation**

	FEMALE PARTICIPANTS		MALE PARTICIPANTS	
EMILY'S REACTION	Excitement	17%	Excitement	0%
	Anger	6%	Anger	18%
	Self-doubt	61%	Self-doubt	40%
CHRIS'S REACTION	Excitement	75%	Excitement	51%
	Anger	5%	Anger	0%
	Self-doubt	10%	Self-doubt	20%

Similarly, gender differences regarding representations of emotional reactions toward sexual experimentation were evident. Corresponding to women's representation of Emily's excitement, Sarah's excitement about sexual experimentation was also more common in women's accounts: 'Sarah has secretly been hoping Matt would be more adventurous so was very excited that he had brought out this vibrator' (2FNTSEM), compared to a largely absent representation of Sarah's excitement in male participants' accounts. Men's stories about Sarah's emotional reaction to sexual experimentation were mostly about disgust, 'Sarah thought that this was revolting' (85MTSEM), compared to small percentage of the stories

written by women. Both men and women wrote stories that suggested that Matt's ideas about sexual experimentation would elicit self-doubt in Sarah, 'Sarah wondered why he was suggesting this and thought maybe he was 'Doesn't he like what I do?, He doesn't fancy me any more... it's because I've put on weight..he's bored and thinks I am fat..he's going to leave me' (105MTSEM).

Women attributed far greater excitement to Matt than men did: 'Matt could not believe his luck, he was feeling tension in his pants' (21FNTSES), and men were more likely to write stories whereby Sarah's suggestion elicited discomfort in Matt: 'Matt finds this an intimidating proposal and feels uncomfortable' (81MNTSES). Men were also more likely than women to write stories in which Matt's reaction was self-doubting than women were, and similarly men, unlike women, also wrote some stories where fear was elicited by Sarah's suggestion: 'How could he tell her that he was scared? Is my style not good enough? Is my penis too small? Will she leave me if I can't satisfy her, and maybe Sarah just fakes having orgasms? Matt feels mortally wounded?' (111MTSES). See Table 8 for a breakdown of participants' representations of emotional reactions by participant and character.

**Table 8: Emotional Responses to the suggestions of 'something new'**

FEMALE	MALE PARTICIPANTS
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## PARTICIPANTS

SARAH'S REACTION	Excitement	21%	Excitement	0%
	Self-doubt	35%	Self-doubt	25%
	Anxiety	17%	Anxiety	11%
MATT'S REACTION	Excitement	55%	Excitement	20%
	Self-doubt	10%	Self-doubt	22%
	Anxiety	0%	Anxiety	10%

Two more recent SC studies (e.g. Clarke et al. 2014, Frith, 2013) did not report the participants gender difference evident in the earlier studies (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2006). Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) thematic analysis indicated that male participants tended to sexualise and female participants to romanticise the cue relationship. Men described the relationship as casual and sexually-focused, and minimised the emotional impact of infidelity, especially when writing about John, who was most often described as reacting with indifference. Female participants described the relationship as mutually loving and trusting and emphasised the emotionally devastating impact of infidelity for both Clare and John. As discussed in the methodology section, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) offered a social constructionist and an essentialist reading of their data. In their essentialist reading of the data, the authors explained this difference by arguing that women projected their fantasy of an idealised version of romantic relationships into their writing. This tendency is also partly apparent in this data set: women depicted more sexual excitement in the male characters

regarding the female characters' sexual behaviour, while also failing to depict the discomfort and self-doubt that was attributed to male characters by male writers. What is different about the data here is that there is a stronger focus on sex in women's writing than in Kiztinger's and Powell's (1995) original study. Women represented Sarah and Emily's excitement and confidence about sex to a much higher degree than men. Furthermore, while the women in the Kiztinger and Powell (1995) sample represented men as being emotionally devastated by Claire's infidelity, thereby emphasising male emotionality, the women in this study depict Matt and Chris as mechanical sex machines who are turned on by everything, thereby minimising male feelings of fear, anxiety and disgust. This may lead to the assumption that both men and women hold caricatured versions of one another; female participants represented male sexuality as more unbridled than male participants, and male participants represented female sexuality as more reserved and anxious than female participants.

## Discussion

The discussion is organised into two parts: in the first part, I discuss the key findings arising from this research examining the main patterns across both stories. In the second part, I discuss the implication of the findings for counselling psychology training and practice, comment on SC as a viable research tool for feminist scholarship within and beyond the context of counselling psychology, reflect on the limitations of this study and make suggestions for future research directions.

### **Main Patterns across both Stories**

I begin this section by outlining how participants' narratives of sexual experimentation and masturbation reproduce normative versions of sexuality, sex and sexual practice and render discourses of pleasure largely obsolete. Second, I discuss how the discursive imperatives to 'do' 'normal' gender coalesce in accounts of heterosexual to perpetuate prescriptive notions of sexual practice, produce unequal gendered relationships and generate different obligations and entitlements for women and men. Third, I consider the impact of participants' gender on the development of the narratives in the stories and to what extent the current study extends existing knowledge of how gender mediates access to particular discourses of sexuality and relationships more broadly. Fourth, I discuss the stories the therapist-participants wrote and consider how therapists accessed a broader discursive repertoire to make sense of challenges within the couple relationships. Finally, I consider how all of the participants drew on the same patriarchal hegemonic discourses in their construction of heterosexual.

**'Doing normal' sex.** The narratives of both sexual experimentation and masturbation were largely organised by a discourse of normality; a desire to do 'normal' sex was powerfully

present throughout the data. By reflecting the influence of an increasingly pornographised mainstream culture (Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2009a, 2012a&b; McNair, 2002) the stories evidenced a shift in cultural norms around (hetero)sex, while simultaneously reproducing traditional heteronormative accounts of sexual practice. For example, sexually explicit practices (e.g. anal sex and BDSM) were presented as expected parts of the (hetero)sexual repertoire which marks a shift from previous conceptualisations of heterosex (Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2009, 2012a&b). However, sexual practice remained underpinned by 'pseudo' reciprocity (Braun et al., 2003; Gilfoyle et al., 1992), a coital imperative (Jackson, 1984; McPhillips et al., 2001) and an orgasm imperative (Potts, 2002). These imperatives frame 'good' sex as a penis-in-vagina intercourse that ends in (male) orgasm.

The stories constructed the characters' concern with being 'charmed' or 'normal' as the driving factor in their decision to engage in, or refrain from, particular sexual practices. As such, the binaries that demarcate the boundaries between 'charmed' and 'uncharmed' practices continue to maintain the individual's desire to stay on the 'charmed' side of this boundary. For example, sexual experimentation was constructed in ways that created obligations on the characters to engage in particular forms of sex rather than liberating them to pursue greater sexual freedoms. This contrasts the assumption that the influence of pornography on representations of mainstream sex (Gill 2009, Attwood 2006, McNair 2002) has increased access to pleasure through making a more diverse representations of sex available (Weiss, 2006). Instead of giving greater access to pleasure, the concept of sexual experimentation was employed as a vital tool that allowed the characters to perform normative sex. As such, both male and female characters were frequently depicted as feeling

pressured to suggest 'something new', as well as to respond positively when 'something new' was suggested to them, despite being portrayed as feeling anxious and uncomfortable.

Indeed, critical sex therapists (e.g. Barker, 2011b; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 1998, 2004; Tiefer, 2001, 2003, 2012), suggest that individuals' desire to be normal has a greater influence on their sexual practices than their desire to experience pleasure. They argue that the distress about not feeling 'normal' drives people to seek treatment to overcome physical barriers to 'normal' (hetero)sex (e.g. penis-in-vagina). Conventional treatments often disregard the importance of pleasure, and in making such treatments available, therapists collude with individuals' anxieties about being 'normal' and can inadvertently turn therapy into an oppressive perpetuator of a 'toxic norm' (Kleinplatz, 2012; p. 117).

Overall, a discourse of pleasure was largely absent from participants' talk about sex, which echoes Fine's (1988) original findings on the prevalence of a 'missing discourse of desire' which remains to be inherent in anti-sex rhetoric in the sex education system (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Some of the stories on masturbation offered an interesting alternative to the missing discourse of desire, presenting the physical pleasure of orgasm as the main objective of sexual activity and masturbation as a most efficient strategy to obtain orgasm for both the male and female characters. Pleasing a partner was constructed as impeding one's own sexual gratification and as a expendable part of sexual practice. Female masturbation in particular was seen as a necessary strategy to manage women's 'elusive' and 'complicated' sexuality; the latter was often seen as the root cause of the difficulties between the couple. Even though masturbation was depicted as a more efficient and effective technique in

securing orgasms, coitus was presented as an essential part of relationships, thereby reflecting Hite (1988) original findings sexual practice. Relationship breakdown was strongly related to the absence of coitus and many stories presented masturbation as an effective strategy to manage sexual frustrations from unsatisfactory coitus to prevent relationship breakdown. The participants' depictions of masturbation thus offered some challenges to heteronormative understandings of sex, but also remained deeply bound up with the reproduction of a coital imperative. Although these stories position the pursuit of pleasure above coitus, they cannot be regarded as offering entirely new ways of understanding sex and sexuality because masturbation was largely regarded as a compensatory practice for unfulfilling coital sex.

**'Doing normal' gender.** Male and female sexuality was constructed as polarised yet complementary; the male role was to be the provider of sex, whereas the female role was concerned with enticing male desire. Adherence to gender roles was presented as central to the performance of a normative version of sex and sexuality. As such, a partner's masturbation or suggestion of sexual experimentation was depicted as a threat to the other partner's ability to fulfil their role and thus evoked anxiety. Anxiety was represented as turned inward; manifested as self-doubt and insecurity or turned towards the other partner as aggression and anger. Consistent with traditional understandings of gender that offer men an active subject position and women a passive one (Gavey, 2005, Jackson, 1993, Jackson & Cram, 2003; Jeffreys, 1990, Nicolson, 1993, Potts, 2002, Tiefer, 2004), the male characters were more likely to be depicted as blaming others (outward anger) and female characters were more likely to be depicted as blaming themselves (inward anger).

Women's gender role was organised around Hochschild's (2012b) notion of 'emotion work', which described the social expectation that women are responsible for the smooth-running of relationships and for managing men's emotional and sexual needs, often at the expense of their own. For example, both men and women were depicted as understanding a partner's masturbation as a criticism of their failing to adequately fulfil their gender role; female characters were presented as more likely to respond to such criticism by feeling guilty and attempting to regain men's attention. Men's feelings of guilt were often presented as easily overridden by their own sexual excitement. Thus, men's sexuality was depicted as biologically driven, 'raring to go anytime, anyplace, anywhere' (Farvid & Braun, 2006, p. 301); men were constructed as being at the mercy of their physicality which served to offload their responsibility for meeting women's sexual needs (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Jackson, 1984; Potts, 2002).

Male and female gender roles and the differences between them were depicted as 'normal' and 'natural'. Farvid and Braun (2006, 2014) have argued that persistent depictions of 'natural' gender differences serve to perpetuate notions of biological rootedness and render such differences as being 'unquestionable' and potentially 'unchangeable'. Consequently, such differences are often accepted as inevitable rather than resisted or challenged (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Different depictions of male and female gender are particularly apparent in participants' constructions of masturbation. Unlike male masturbation, which was constructed as an expression of an insatiable biologically-driven sexuality, participants' representations of female masturbation predominantly reiterated women's role as the enticers of sex. While masturbation was generally depicted as a

potential challenge to heteronormativity, as outlined in the section above, participants' constructions of women's gender role mitigated masturbation's potential to prioritise pleasure over heteronormativity. For example, similar to Kinsey's (1953/1998) original findings some stories constructed women's masturbation as a performance to evoke a sexual response in men, while others depicted it as a learning experience underpinned by the assumption that it would improve coital performance. Thus, female masturbation was presented as a strategy to increase competence and the capacity to engage men, rather than as a way in which women may pursue pleasure for themselves. This reinforces a have/hold discourse that posits the securing of a long-term monogamous relationship as the primary aim of women's endeavours (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Potts, 2002; Hollway, 1989).

The importance of evoking male sexual responses to the performance of female sexuality was particularly apparent in the stories that referenced pornography. Participants constructed pornography as women's competitor for male attention, predominantly presenting it as more easily available, more exciting and more difficult to resist than sex with their female partner. Moreover, female participants afforded pornography a legitimate position of authority, by presenting it as an appropriate source of knowledge to draw on, in order for the female character to equip herself with the tools to regain the male character's attention. As such, the male character's consumption of pornography offered their female partner another opportunity to learn about male sexuality and subsequently cater to it. Much like masturbation, pornography was constructed as an educational tool for women, while women were constructed as being locked into the primary concern of having and holding men in relationships.

It is interesting to consider the construction of an educational dimension to women's use of pornography alongside that of men's. In the wider cultural context, male pornography consumption as a source of education is seen as the prerogative of only young, sexually inexperienced men (Allen, 2001); adult men are often positioned as sexually confident and knowledgeable, experts even, who enlighten women about sex (Potts, 2002). The participants in this study presented the male character as sexually mature, and tended to draw on a construction of adult men as 'sexperts'. Male pornography consumption was constructed both in terms of the sexual unavailability of the female character and the insatiable male sex drive (Allen, 2001; Hollway, 1984). Thus women were not only depicted as more invested in meeting men's sexual needs than men were in meeting women's needs, but the gendered depiction of pornography consumption served to reiterate unequal positions of power. Thus it seems that in cultural discourse men are only positioned as 'learners' when they are young and sexually inexperienced, whereas women are constructed as perpetual learners regardless of sexual maturity. This serves to position men as 'experts' and women as 'learners' and therefore further infantilises women and subordinates their sexuality to men's.

Women's obligation to cater to men's sexual needs can be observed in the plethora of strategies used to augment their sex appeal and boost sexual competence, such as the use of props, lingerie or other appearance enhancing practices (Durham, 1998; Frith, 2013; Garner, Sterk & Adams, 1998; Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008). This can be understood in terms of what Tyler (2004) calls the 'performance imperative' - a shift towards understanding sexuality as something to be worked at and improved upon in order to develop competence (Cacchioni, 2007; Jackson & Scott, 2001; Tyler, 2004). However, the nature of this work remains highly

gendered (Durham, 1998; Frith, 2013; Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998; Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008). As such the representations of sex and sexual relationships captured in the stories appear to be organised by a hegemonic patriarchal ideology that provides men and women with unequal access to sexual pleasure, obligations and entitlements (Farvid, 2015; Frith, 2013; Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998; Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008; Potts, 2002).

**Participant gender differences.** This study supports Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) findings, and also those of Whitty (2005), concerning the relationship between gender and the use of discourse. However, this has not been extensively explored by more recent SC studies (e.g. Frith, 2013; Clarke et al., 2015). The most notable differences in this study were the depictions of the emotional reactions ascribed to the characters in the stories. While participants largely attributed the same range of emotions (anxiety, excitement, self-doubt, anger, fear and disgust) to both male and female characters, the degree to which particular emotions were ascribed to characters varied significantly between the genders of the characters and participants. Female participants depicted male characters as more sexually excited and less anxious and self-doubting than male participants did, and depicted female characters as more sexually excited and self-doubting, and less angry and disgusted than the male participants perceived them to be. Conversely, male participants depicted male characters as less sexually excited, angry and disgusted and more anxious and self-doubting than female participants did and depicted female characters as more anxious, angry and disgusted and less excited than female participants perceived them to be. Thereby participants had a tendency to draw on culturally caricatured versions of the opposite gender, with female participants being more likely to represent a male sexuality that is

unbridled and primed for sexual activity, and male participants being more likely to represent a more reserved and anxious female sexuality in their accounts. Participants also tended to depict the character who corresponded to their own sex as less disgusted and shaming of the other partner's behaviour than the character of the other gender.

Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) thematic analysis indicated that male participants tended to sexualize the relationship whereas female participants romanticised it. They explained this difference by arguing that the female participants in their study drew on an idealised version of romantic relationships in their writing. In the current study, female participants depicted Sarah's and Emily's attempts to evoke sexual arousal in Matt and Chris as far more successful than those in male participants. The difference in the levels of success in evoking sexual arousal in men can also be regarded as a form of idealisation on behalf of the female participants. The main difference in this study compared to the Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) study is that overall there is a stronger focus on sex and on female sexual excitement and confidence in female participants' writing than in the stories written by female participants in Kitzinger and Powell. This could be understood in terms of the changes within cultural discourse since the 1990s towards increasingly 'hypersexualised' versions of female sexuality which has increased the availability of discourses of explicit female sexuality (Attwood, 2006, 2009; Farvid, 2015; Gill, 2009, 2012a&b; Levy, 2005).

The other notable way in which participant gender differences were apparent in the stories was in the female participants' use of sexual experimentation to address a gender power imbalance. In these stories, sexual experimentation was presented as an opportunity to induce the same level of discomfort in the male characters as their request evoked in the

female characters. Women's negotiation of sex acts as being primarily focused on obtaining 'reciprocal justice' can be understood in terms of what Hare-Mustin (1991) termed the 'marriage-between-equals discourse' to describe the social imperative for women to present their relationships with men as equal. Dryden (1999) argued that this veneer of gender equality is often pursued with such vigour that actual inequalities get overlooked. In the current study, for example, female participants' concern with making Matt as uncomfortable as Sarah seemed more important to them than exploring Sarah's discomfort, thus creating a defeatist subjectivity in which 'real' equality is regarded as an unattainable goal and 'quasi' equality is accepted instead (Hochschild, 2012a).

**Therapists' constructions of heterosexual.** Therapists' accounts of heterosexual reflected the dominant hegemonic patriarchal ideology of the wider cultural environment and were indistinguishable from non-therapists' constructions. However, there were some marked differences between the stories written by the two participant groups in relation to how they made sense of relational difficulties. Whilst both therapists and non-therapists drew on the same problematic heteronormative discourses to construct masturbation and sexual experimentation, the 'difficulties' that these caused in the couple relationships were generally framed by therapist participants as opportunities for personal growth and for increasing emotional depth in the relationship. Furthermore, therapists included greater emotional complexity and more internal and external dialogue in their narratives; communication was advocated as a gateway to improved relationships, in contrast to non-therapists' representations of communication as a complicating factor. By including multiple viewpoints and 'formulations' of people's difficulties, therapists' narratives appeared more 'objective'

and less invested in a single position; as such they conveyed a more detached narrative style than non-therapists did.

The characteristics of therapists' stories can be clearly mapped against the competencies that are developed during therapeutic training (Tribe & Morrissey, 2015). Therapeutic training and practice is concerned with finding creative and meaningful solutions to the difficulties people present, understanding difficulties from multiple perspectives, constructing difficulties in terms of personal histories and maintaining a detached stance when thinking about other people's problems (Johnstone & Dallos, 2013). The close link between the core attributes of therapeutic training and the distinct features of therapists' narratives, suggests that therapists may have drawn on their experiences of professional therapeutic training and practice in their (re)presentations of the cue characters' intimate relationships. Professional therapeutic training therefore appears to provide access to wider discursive repertoires around relationships and their problems and difficulties. This supports the notion that training does indeed offers therapists' access to new discursive possibilities (Moon, 2008, 2009, 2011).

However, it is of some concern that therapeutic training does not challenge participants' tendency to draw on heteronormative discourses that promote conformity. Therapists' narratives were limited by the same gendered hegemonic norms as those of the non-therapists, which seems to suggest an absence of a critical understanding of sex. This provides support for Hare-Mustin's (1995) proposition that therapists are embedded within social and cultural discourses that set the parameters for their interactions with their clients. Offering therapists critical frameworks for making sense of heterosex, such as those

proposed by critical feminist scholars (e.g. Barker, 2011a, 2011b; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013; Frith, 2013; Gavey et al., 1999; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 1998, 2004; Moon, 2011; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2001, 2008, 2012), could potentially increase their discursive repertoires and have a positive impact on their understanding of the nuanced ways in which heteronormativity continues to perpetuate constraining and oppressive practices of gender expression. Developing critical frameworks would therefore enable therapists to offer new discursive parameters to their clients.

### **Implications for Counselling Psychology: Recommendations for Practitioners, Supervisors and Training Providers**

In this section of this discussion I consider the implications of this study for counselling psychology. I argue that social constructionism offers counselling psychologists a framework to develop the identity of their discipline in line with a greater commitment to one of its core values: social justice (BPS, 2005). I argue that this puts the profession in a stronger position to assume leadership in diversity issues for all applied psychologies. I therefore advocate the inclusion of social constructionist frameworks into the training and practice of counselling psychologists and offer a reflection on the applicability of SC methods in counselling psychology research.

Sinclair (2007) argued that the 'transparent and watchful practice that affects personal and social change' (p. 165) can only be achieved by acknowledging the influence that dominant discourses have on therapy. She urges therapists to engage with Hare-Mustin's (1994) concerns about the role therapy plays in serving the agenda of the dominant culture. Despite an increasing curiosity about the social and cultural dimensions of

therapeutic work in counselling psychology (e.g. Milton 2014, 2012; Moon, 2011; Tindall, Robinson & Kagan, 2010; Milton, Craven & Coyle, 2010; Hicks, 2010; Eleftheriadou, 2010, 2003; Lofthouse, 2010; Milton, Coyle & Legg, 2002; Spinelli, 1997), the literature responding to Hare-Mustin's (1994) concerns with issues of power is sparse. Relatedly, some argue that social responsibility within the therapeutic professions continues to be overlooked (Guilfoyle, 2002; Goldberg, 2001; Sinclair, 2007).

The findings from the current study provide support for Hare-Mustin's concern that therapists are as locked into, and draw on, the same normative hegemonic patriarchal discourses as those who have not been therapeutically trained. Although this research did not explore therapists' therapeutic practice directly, or enquire about therapists' 'real life' experiences of negotiating sexual material in the room, the SC method provided some insights into the discursive meanings of heterosex that therapists drew on.

Therapists' embeddedness within the heteronormative patriarchal ideology has been explained through a lack of commitment to critical approaches on professional training courses (Moon, 2011; Hicks & Milton, 2010). Whilst this is an issue that concerns the majority of professional training programmes for therapists (Feltham, 2010), a lack of criticality is a particular issue for counselling psychology (Feltham, 2013; Milton, Craven & Coyle, 2010; Moller, 2011; Moon, 2011). Counselling psychology's longstanding interest in oppression and the cultural manifestations of power (Milton 2014, 2012; Moon, 2011; Tindall, Robinson & Kagan, 2010; Milton, Craven & Coyle, 2010; Hicks, 2010; Eleftheriadou, 2010, 2003; Lofthouse, 2010; Milton, Coyle & Legg, 2002; Spinelli, 1997) is deeply embedded in the field's professional and regulatory standards (BPS, 2005, 2007). However, attention to the wider

context is often lost in predominantly humanistic and phenomenological accounts of personhood, therefore a critical framework that seeks to challenge common conceptualisation is still missing from training agendas (Moon, 2011; Tindall et al, 2010).

Due to psychologists' influence on wider standards of therapeutic practice, it is particularly important for them to engage with frameworks that equip them to interrogate the social, cultural, historical and political environments in which they work (Milton et al., 2002). The 2007 government document *New Ways of Working for Applied Psychologists* (Onyett, 2007), highlights the importance for psychological leadership in NHS mental health services. Significantly, the main identified aspect of effective psychological leadership was the ability to offer authoritative alternatives to the medical model (Onyett, 2007). Onyett outlined that psychologists' position within NHS systems affords them real influence within clinical and organisational governance and that their work has far reaching implications for the surrounding care systems and wider society. Fostering greater criticality within the profession will therefore effect change not only within psychological practice but impact on individuals care through the system around them.

While counselling psychology may be well placed to be at the forefront of social justice debates, (Moon, 2011; Milton et al., 2010; Tindall et al., 2010), chartered members of the division who take this challenge on remain isolated beacons of critical scholarship, and the division remains largely unconcerned about the lack of teaching in this area (Hill, 2013; Moon, 2011). Counselling psychology's reluctance to pursue social justice agendas has been explained by a lack of a cohesive professional identity. Milton et al. (2010) have argued that counselling psychology struggles with assuming a critical position for fear of losing credibility

within the wider psychological research community. Indeed, practitioners shy away from discursive approaches to therapy due to difficulties in producing outcome research, which results in an empirical chasm between social constructionism and applied psychology (Sinclair, 2007).

A critical approach to psychology has been described as 'a movement that challenges psychology to work towards emancipation and social justice, and that opposes the uses of psychology to perpetuate oppression and injustice' (Austin & Prilleltensky 2001, p. X). Critical psychologists have consistently pointed towards psychology's problematic origins in a hegemonic patriarchal ideology and have called for a greater degree of self-scrutiny to assess psychology's role in perpetuating problematic value systems through the consumption and production of research (Nicolson 1992; Ussher, 1992). Fundamental to a critical enquiry is the acknowledgement that people reside in a social context that gives meaning to experience and prioritises and privileges certain ways of being over others (Hicks, 2010).

Counselling psychology's origins as an alternative to mainstream approaches and its stated commitment to pursuing a wider social justice agenda positions it as a potential bridge between critical approaches and applied psychology (Clark & Loewenthal, 2015; Hicks & Milton, 2010). Fostering a critical stance in counselling psychologists will not only allow the social justice agenda of the discipline to be met more consistently but could also support a more coherent and consistent professional identity. Hicks and Milton (2010) argued that counselling psychologists should consider the contexts in which stigmatisation and prejudice occur and reflect on their own role in perpetuating oppression. Whilst reflexivity is an integral part of the counselling psychologist's personal and professional development, Moon (2011)

raised alarm about the lack of criticality in counselling psychology's reflective-models of practice, and warned that without thorough training in socially critical standpoints, reflexivity tends to be tokenistic and fails to address the deeply embedded heteronormative patriarchal structures within the profession. Heteronormative patriarchal values continue to colour psychological training and practice and therefore it is important that psychologists learn to identify and challenge patriarchal ideology and to understand its role in perpetuating oppressive practices within applied psychology (Tindall et al., 2010).

The effects of internalised gender roles can influence client's construction of personal power; in order for counselling psychologists to offer real alternatives to clients, they need to understand how individuals' social value and self-esteem may be rooted in patriarchal systems that prescribe problematic versions of gender and sexuality (Biever, De Las Fuentes, Cashion & Franklin; 1998; Chester & Bretherton, 2001; Mareck and Kravetz, 1998; Moon, 2011, Tindal et al, 2010; Tiefer, 2008).

Within applied psychology, a critical perspective places psychological practice within a wider social and political context and is seen as an important development from a scientist-practitioner and reflective-practitioner perspective. By endeavouring to train counselling psychologists to be critical counselling psychologists, recognition is given to the uses and misuses of psychology as well as placing emphasis on the individual and social responsibility of the counselling psychologists to shape research and practice ethically and drive a wider social justice agenda.

### **Story Completion as a Viable Research Tool**

As a critical qualitative research tool story completion is, as yet, in its infancy having only been used in a few studies using student samples to date. Therefore, this study contributes to the small body of research that has employed this method (e.g., Clarke et al., 2014; Frith, 2013; Walsh & Malson, 2010; Whitty, 2005, Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; see also Gavin, 2005; Livingston & Testa, 2000). Kitzinger and Powell (1995) originally advocated the use of the SC method for student samples, arguing that their written fluency makes them an ideal participant group. The current study indicates that the SC data collection format can be successfully utilised with non-student samples as evidenced by the long and detailed stories produced (average = 297 words), which compare favourably to the story length reported in previous SC research (Clarke et al., 2015, average = 258 words; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2012, average = 195 words; Frith, 2013, average = 72 words). However, because the data were collected online, those responding to the research request were perhaps already accustomed to expressing themselves in a written format. It could be argued that the increasing use of online media to communicate, makes the SC method a particularly appropriate way to engage with online communities and reach samples who may be uncomfortable with traditional data collection methods such as face to face interviews.

The social constructions of heterosex by participants in this study are comparable to the findings of feminist researchers using more traditional research methods such as interviews (Braun et al 2006; Gavey, 2005; Gavey et al., 1999, McPhillips et al, 2001), focus groups (Braun, 2000; Frith, 2000), and secondary sources (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013, 2014; Potts, 2002). The access SC method offers to socio-cultural discourses is thus not only equivalent but arguably more sensitive than more traditional data collection methods (e.g.

interviews). For example, the data revealed patriarchal hegemonic views that would perhaps be less readily revealed in face to face interviews, particularly in the therapist sample. In addition, it has been suggested that social desirability is a particular issue when researching therapists; therapeutic training can encourage a detached and overtly 'politically correct' stance in therapists which may cause them to mask socially undesirable views in a research interview (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Tribe, 2015). SC may therefore, not only be suited to particularly sensitive topics, but also be more appropriate for samples where social desirability is a specific issue (Moore, Gullone and Kostanski, 1997: 372).

This study also extends current knowledge on the use of comparative SC designs by exploring the influence of professional group membership on the negotiation of heteronormativity. By finding substantial differences between the two participant groups, this research provides support for the usefulness of applying SC method to assess exposure to different cultural environments (e.g. therapeutic training) on the negotiation of dominant discourse more generally.

Furthermore, this study advances current applications of the SC method by asking participants to complete more than one story. Neither Gavin (2005) nor Walsh and Malson (2010), who both asked their participants to complete more than one story, reported story lengths. The current study indicates that asking participants to complete two stories did not impact on the length of the story produced by participants: The stories written in response to the masturbation cue were 324 words on average and the stories written in response to the sexual experimentation cue were an average of 271 words (Either story was as likely as the other to appear first).

As such the findings of this study suggest that the SC method is a rigorous and versatile tool for exploring socio-cultural discourses and dominant meanings around socially sensitive topics; particularly due to its potential to elicit what may be felt to be socially undesirable views from participants. In addition, the SC method provides a systematic and concrete tool for implementing comparative designs, as well as offering the pragmatic benefits of a potentially less time-consuming data collection process (especially if used online) than more established research methods.

**Story completion and counselling psychology research and training.** Hypothetical vignettes and scenarios are well-integrated components of counselling psychology training programmes (Milton, 2010). Counselling psychologists are therefore not only accustomed to using scenarios in teaching and training but also to interpreting responses to them. SC research could therefore offer interesting opportunities for developing training programmes could also be used in assessments and examinations of clinical competencies. In addition, the SC method and research fits well with counselling psychology's focus on ethical and reflective practice. SC can offer new ways of interrogating important questions concerning social justice and oppression in therapeutic training, practice and research. Its inclusion into the research toolkit of counselling psychologists could contribute to counselling psychology's commitment to foregrounding concerns of ethical practice within applied psychologies.

### **Limitations of the Research**

It is important to note the limitations of the sample. This was a volunteer sample composed of professional and relatively privileged (mostly white, middle-class and heterosexual) people, and the results should be interpreted with this in mind. In addition, research evidence suggests that those who volunteer to participate in research on sex have characteristics that differentiate them from the general population; sex research volunteers have been found to score highly on measures of sexual experience, sexually liberal attitudes, sexual esteem and sexual sensation seeking (Barker & Perlman, 1975; Bogaert, 1996; Strassberg & Lowe, 1995; Wiederman, 1999). The process of using my professional relationships with organisations to source research participants also evidences this. For example, approaching a local police service produced no uptake in research participation, whereas a high interest was generated among teaching staff in the schools and universities that I contacted. Police staff have traditionally been associated with higher levels of conservatism (Cook, 1977; Robinson & Fleishman, 1988), while teachers and lecturers demonstrate higher levels of liberalism (Horowitz, 2007; Kurtz, 2005; Solon, 2015). It may be assumed that people holding more traditional views generally may have been less represented in this sample and that people with liberal attitudes may have been more common.

Another distinguishing factor of this participant sample may be a higher degree of written fluency than in the general population; 61% of participants who began the research process withdrew when they got to the first scenario. This may be explained in terms of participant discomfort with writing, discomfort with sexual content, or being under time constraints at the time of opening the survey. The participants in this sample may therefore

have been more comfortable with expressing themselves through writing than the general population.

Furthermore, whilst the collection of data online has been associated with a reduced sex research volunteer bias (Hope, 2008), the anonymity of the online environment can also have a disinhibiting effect (Suler, 2004). While this can lead to more honest reporting, it can also result in a sensationalising or deliberate 'shock' effect that can sabotage data (Konstan, Rosser, Ross, Stanton, & Edwards, 2005; Ross, Mansson, Daneback, Cooper, & Ronny Tikkanen, 2005). For example, the responses from one participant were not included in the analysis due to a disclosure of paedophilia in the 'sexual orientation' question; it is difficult to determine if this participant disclosed illegal views to 'shock' the researcher or if the anonymity of the internet provided the sense of safety necessary to allow the disclosure of socially abhorrent practices. Suler (2004) noted that online personas represent a person's less inhibited self, not necessarily a self that accurately represents their offline activities. However, the design of the study makes this gap between the online and offline self less of a concern: The main focus of the study was the difference between therapists' responses and those who have not been therapeutically trained, and there is no literature to suggest that therapists' online behaviour may differ from other people's. When used in a social constructionist framework, SC research is not concerned with the extent to which participants' stories reflect their 'real world' views and behaviours. The comparative component of SC method is thus a particular strength of the design as the observable difference and similarities within the stories impart the data's specific analytic significance.

#### **Post data analysis reflexivity**

The main thrust of my argument throughout this thesis has been how a social constructionist perspective can allow the identity of a counselling psychologist to become more coherent and consistent. In doing so, it is equally important to recognise the potential fragmenting effect of trying to hold on to a social perspective amidst the very personal process of individual therapy. Thus I would like to offer my reflection of how conducting this research has impacted on my own identity as a counselling psychologist.

Initially I have experienced my interest in social process and my interest in individual process as pulling me in two different directions. Working with people therapeutically draws me into a subjective experience; therapy can be described as a microscopic exercise where personal meaning in a person's narrative is given great importance. Social constructionism pulls me out to look at the world around me, and appreciate the overarching structures that guide people's thinking and doing; a macroscopic exercise that is interested in the collective level of human experience. For me, training as a counselling psychologist has been an attempt to find a way to integrate both interests into a place where I can hold both without being pulled by either and learn to understand the interplay between them allow one to inform the other. Unlike other professional practitioner courses endorsed by the BPS, counselling psychology clearly states a commitment to understand social process in its professional practice guidelines. In trying to form an identity that is separate and distinct from, for example the more established field of clinical psychologists, the focus on issues of oppression and marginalisation in mental health is an obvious anchor point for me. An exploration of oppression and marginalisation without a social constructionist framework runs the risk to be tokenistic, as social constructionism is sensitive enough in its approach to

not only unpick the underlying structures that give rise to oppression but also allow for rigours interrogation of our own part in perpetuation oppression. My commitment to social constructionism and social process allows me to contribute distinctive skills to multi-disciplinary working teams in a time when issues of diversity are gaining increasing visibility on mental health agendas. Socially ascribed roles are being challenged and deconstructed in many areas, there are multiple genders, multiple sexualities and multiple ways of doing relationships. Being able to recognise the tension and complexities of social normativity in privileging some experience and perpetuating power indifferences equips me to face the challenges of modern mental health working.

I have found section three of the professional practice guidelines for counselling psychologist particularly helpful in bringing my identity together as it speaks to both my two interests of looking at detail (pulling in) and looking at structure (pulling out). Section three sets out that counselling psychologists have an obligation to consider their responsibilities to the wider world at all times. "They will be attentive to life experience, modes of inquiry and areas of knowledge beyond the immediate environments of counselling psychology and seek to draw on this knowledge to aid communication or understanding within and outside of their work." (BPS, p. 7). Whilst the 'pulling out' effect of social constructionism poses challenges to s therapist trying to connect with individual experience, understanding the social world around individuals and how their experience may be socially constituted offers counselling psychologist a basis to form a unique and distinct professional identity.

In adopting a social constructionist frame it is important to recognise the potential pitfalls with locating people's experience in social discourse, rather than within a

phenomenological 'core self' that may exist independently. Regarding people as only constituted through discourse may reduce the importance or significance of personal experience and dampens the potential for personal growth and autonomy in the minds of therapists. However rather than reducing the richness in meaning that clinical material provides an awareness of discursive repertoires clients may draw on or potential subjectivities they may assume in constructing their own identity can enrich the very therapy we offer. For example, Kleinplatz (2010) strongly advises that treatment of erectile dysfunction needs to include a discussion of the socially constituted coital imperative, in order to allow clients to re-examine the position they assume with regards to their symptomatology.

Having completed the analysis, an absence of unproblematic constructions of heterosexual encounters has become evident. Reflecting on this various points of consideration are apparent. Whilst the predominantly problematic constructions of heterosex are evident across the literature on contemporary relationships (see, Farvid, 2015, Farvid and Braun, 2006; 2013; Frith 2013), looking for trends and patterns within data sets will invariable reproduce dominant ways of making sense of data. One way of addressing this issues is by specifically searching for deviant case examples (Mills, 2010), looking for stories that may not fit within a specific trend or an overarching theme. One of the challenges in identifying narratives that fall outside trends is being able to recognise them. Reflecting on the analysis I wonder to what extent I may not have been able to recognise alternative constructions of heterosex due to a) my theoretical submergence within feminist scholarship that focuses on problematizes heteronormativity and b) Foucault's (2003) assertion that all

discussion around sexual material, is inevitably framed within the discourses available in contemporary culture. Thus the unavailability of unproblematic discourses of heterosex will also impact on my ability to recognise such discourse in the data. This will be not important development of this study but a consideration for SC research as a whole.

Lastly I would like to reflect on my decision to discount the story that entailed a paedophilic narrative. My decision to not include this story came from a position of wanting to connote my own position of condemning sexual practices with children, and perhaps in some way prevent such narratives to gain a platform through my research. In reflection of this decision I realise that making morally informed decisions about the data could be interpreted as an essentialist assumption on my behalf and thus highlight inconsistencies in my epistemological underpinning. Further reflection lead to additional interpretations of this decisions; Masling (1966) researched negativism in participants, something that has become known as the 'screw-you' effect found that some participant attempt to discern the experimenter's hypotheses, and in order to destroy the credibility of the study responded with the intent to sabotages the data. Walsh, Teo and Baydala (2014) argued that this may occur particularly in situations where the participant feels alienated by the research topic and the research appears to be unrepresentative of the interest of the participant. Rather than making an assumption about the sexual interests of the participant, the story is understood as an incidence of a 'screw-you' effect and therefore dealt with like incidences e.g. where the instruction of 'story about a heterosexual couple' had been ignored and Chris was constructed as a female character.

### Recommendations for further research

Two major research avenues arise from the findings in this study: The expansion of applied research that is informed by a social constructionist perspective and the further development application of the SC method, and the.

Heteronormativity is pervasive, and internalised gender roles influence client's construction of distress, and social expectations of gender roles can mediate any experience that may be brought to therapy such as depression, anxiety or trauma (Tindal et al., 2010). It is important for therapists to be aware of the extent to which patriarchal societal structures can be related to understandings of sexual victimisation, and how heteronormativity can mediate recovery from sexually traumatic experiences (Gavey, 2005; Tindal et al., 2010). Heteronormativity is therefore an important area to consider in future research on sexual trauma. It is suggested that the SC method is an appropriate one for exploring therapists' understandings of this issue.

In addition to developing SC further, it would also be fruitful to explore the effects of therapists' use of discourse in the therapy room, in order to understand further how heteronormativity shapes therapeutic conversations and relationships. It would be interesting to explore therapists' therapeutic practice directly through clinical transcripts or to enquire about therapists' 'real life' experiences of negotiating sexual material in the room through interviews and focus groups with a focus on examining socially critical interpretations (or the lack of) of clients' psychological distress. Furthermore, it is important

to understand therapists' potential barriers to incorporating social constructionism into clinical practice further and to find ways of addressing these.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to the growing body of critical scholarship on heterosex, and offers new findings about how masturbatory practices and sexual experimentation are situated in people's social and personal lives. Patterns in depictions of male and female sexuality could be observed across both scenarios, which highlights the pervasive nature and the regulatory power that cultural discourses hold over how people make sense of (hetero)sexual relationships and the men and women within them. Furthermore, this research demonstrates how a multitude of imperatives can come together to regulate and police heterosex, by placing obligations on people to not only be 'normal' but also to be 'good' at performing sex. Rather than creating new possibilities for men and women, the findings suggest that the mainstreaming of pornography has placed new expectations onto people and altered the parameters of what it means to be normal. As such more 'transgressive' versions of sex merely act as a veneer that mask older and more traditional forms of a hegemonic ideology of sex. The gendered nature of 'old' heteronormative discourses interweave to produce different mechanisms for meeting these 'new' obligations. The consequences of failing to conform to these new heteronorms remain gendered, which renders the choices in reproducing or resisting these unequal for men and women.

Additionally, this research demonstrates the pervasive and perpetual nature of patriarchal hegemonic discourse, by showing that people who have been therapeutically trained are locked into the same oppressive discourses of heterosex as people who have not

been. Thus, this study contributes to, and advances, current knowledge of the SC method. By developing the comparative components of the design to include different sample populations, it provides a window into the scope of the SC method in advancing social justice debates in applied psychology and critical scholarship.

A number of recommendations for research, training and practice arise directly from this research. First, this research recommends an integration of a social constructionist approach into the training and supervision of counselling psychologists and suggests that a critical position offers counselling psychologists a more coherent professional identity and one that meets the expectations of the professional guidelines more consistently. Greater criticality will also allow counselling psychology to advance to the forefront of political debates around the role of psychological theory and practice in perpetuating social oppression, connect important gaps between critical and applied psychology and thus not only look behind the mirrors in the therapy room but also psychology as a discipline more widely.

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## Appendices

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## Appendix A: List of profession listed for Non-Therapist Group

10 x Academics	Keyworker	7 x Supplied No Data
Academic Management (HE)	Legal	3 x Student
Artist, technician, events support	2x Youth worker	2 x Support worker
Artist\Mother	Professional	7 x Teacher
Charity Fundraiser	Project Management	Unemployed
Childcare worker	Recovery Worker	Voluntary Sector Project Coordinator
Company Director	Sales	3 x Writer
Consultant	Sex worker	
Doctor	Sexual health researcher	

## Appendix B: Participant Sourcing Details

JICSMail Groups (<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/>)

JiscMail individuals to communicate & discuss education/research interests using email discussion lists. JiscMail 'is funded by Jisc, which is a charity who champion the use of digital technologies in the UK education and research.'

Jiscmail is aimed at supporting 'people in higher education, further education and skills in the UK to perform at the forefront of international practice by exploiting fully the possibilities of modern digital empowerment, content and connectivity.

The main users are from Higher and Further Education and also Research communities both in the UK and worldwide.'

The specific groups on Jiscmail that were approached with a research participation request were:

PSY-NET-RESEARCH >Psychological research using the Internet

PSY-REL-UK >Psychology and Religion in the UK

PSYCH-CLINICAL >Clinical psychology mailing list

PSYCH-COUNS >Discussion on theoretical and research issues in counselling psychology

PSYCH-METHODS >A discussion list for methods and statistics used in psychological research.

PSYCH-POSTGRADS >Research of postgraduate psychologists.

SEX-ETHICS-POLITICS >International Network for Sexual Ethics and Politics

SEXUALHEALTHRESEARCH >Sexual health research mailing list

SEXUALITIES-IN-CEE >sexualities in central and eastern Europe mailing list

SEXWORKRESEARCH-HUB >the Sex Work Research Hub



Facebook Groups:

Psychology Research Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1605057836419559/>

Sex Research and Surveys:

<https://www.facebook.com/sex.research.and.surveys/?fref=nf>

Psychology's Feminist Voices: <https://www.facebook.com/psychologysfeministvoices/?fref=ts>

PROFESSIONAL CONTACTS	WEBSITE ADDRESS
GLOUCESTER ACADEMY	<a href="http://www.gloucesteracademy.com/">http://www.gloucesteracademy.com/</a>
GLOUCESTERSHIRE CONSTABULARY	<a href="https://www.gloucestershire.police.uk/">https://www.gloucestershire.police.uk/</a>
THE NELSON TRUST	<a href="http://www.nelsontrust.com">http://www.nelsontrust.com</a>
RUSKIN MILL EDUCATION TRUST	<a href="http://rmt.org/">http://rmt.org/</a>
COLLEGE FOR SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP THERAPY	<a href="http://www.cosrt.org.uk/">http://www.cosrt.org.uk/</a>

## Appendix C: Project certificate from UWE ethics



Faculty of Health & Life  
Sciences  
Glenside Campus  
Blackberry Hill  
Stapleton  
Bristol BS16 1DD  
Tel: 0117 328 1170

Our ref: JW/lt

26<sup>th</sup> April 2013

Dear Iduna

**Application number: HLS/13/03/60**

Application title: Exploring constructions of heterosex using story completion: A comparison between psychology students and therapists

Your ethics application was considered by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee and based on the information provided was given ethical approval to proceed. You must notify the Faculty Research Ethics Committee in advance if you wish to make any significant amendments to the original application. If you have to terminate your research before completion, please inform the Faculty Research Ethics Committee within 14 days, indicating the reasons.

Please notify the Faculty Research Ethics Committee if there are any serious events or developments in the research that have an ethical dimension. Any changes to the study protocol, which have an ethical dimension, will need to be approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. You should send details of any such amendments to the committee with an explanation of the reason for the proposed changes. Any changes approved by an external research ethics committee must also be communicated to the relevant UWE committee.

Please note that all information sheets and consent forms should be on UWE headed paper.

Please be advised that as principal investigator you are responsible for the secure storage and destruction of data at the end of the specified period.

Please note: The University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) is required to monitor and audit the ethical conduct of research involving human participants, data and tissue conducted by academic staff, students and researchers. Your project may be selected for audit from the research projects submitted to and approved by the UREC and its committees.

We wish you well with your research.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads 'Julie Woodley'.

Dr Julie Woodley  
Chair Faculty Research Ethics Committee

c.c. Victoria Clarke, Tim Moss

## Appendix D: Participant information sheet (on Qualtrics)



University of the  
West of England

## Perspectives on the sexual relationships: A story completion study

## Participant Information Sheet

## Participant Information

This page contains important information about the research including what participation involves and how your data will be used – please read this carefully before answering the consent question at the bottom of the page.

**Who is doing this research?**

I am Iduna Shah-Beckley, a trainee counselling psychologist on the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology in the Department of Health and Social Sciences at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol. I am completing this research as part of my training (for my doctoral thesis). My research is supervised by Dr Victoria Clarke, Associate Professor in Sexuality Studies in the Department of Health and Social Sciences at UWE.

**What is the research about?**

My research is focused on people's understandings and perceptions of sex in heterosexual relationships, and male and female sexuality. I am particularly interested in how therapists (and trainee therapists) make sense of sex in heterosexual relationships, and exploring whether there are any differences between the views of therapists and those of members of the wider public. I am using an innovative method called 'story completion' to explore people's perceptions of sex in heterosexual relationships. I am collecting responses to 4 different stories and you will be asked to complete 2 stories.

**What does participation involve?**

You are invited to complete two story completion tasks (SCTs) – this means that you read the opening sentences of a story and then write what happens next (and you do this twice). There is **no right or wrong way to complete the stories**, and you can be as creative as you like! I am interested in the range of different stories that people tell. Don't spend too long thinking about what might happen next – just write about whatever first comes to mind. Because detailed stories are crucial for my research, **please take at least 10 minutes completing each story**. Your stories can unfold over the following hours, days, weeks, months or years – you can choose the timescale of the story. Some details of the opening sentences of the story are deliberately vague; it's up to you to be creative and 'fill in the blanks'! There are also some

demographic questions for you to answer after you have completed the stories. To help me to allocate roughly equal numbers of participants to the different versions of the stories, you will be asked to answer some quiz-type questions – your responses to these questions will not form part of the data I collect.

### **How will the data be used?**

The data will be anonymised (i.e., any information that can identify you will be removed) and analysed for my doctoral research project. I will write a report based on the analysis and submit this as one of my course assessments. This means extracts from your stories may be quoted in my report and in any publications and presentations arising from the research. The demographic data for all of the participants will be compiled into a table and included in my report and in any publications or presentations arising from the research. The information you provide will be treated confidentially.

### **Who can participate?**

Anyone over the age of 18.

### **What are the benefits of taking part?**

You will get the opportunity to participate in a research project that has the ultimate aim of informing the development of therapeutic training and practice, particularly in relation to sexuality in heterosexual relationships.

### **How do I withdraw from the research?**

If you decide you want to withdraw from the research after completing the stories – please contact me quoting the unique participant code you'll be asked to create after the consent question and before completing the stories (you won't need to remember this participant code). Please note that there are certain points beyond which it will be impossible to withdraw from the research – for instance, when I have submitted my report. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to contact me within a month of participation if you wish to withdraw your data. I'd like to emphasize that participation in this research is voluntary and all information provided is anonymous.

### **Are there any risks involved?**

I don't anticipate any particular risks with participating in this research; however, there is always the potential for research participation to raise uncomfortable and distressing issues. When you have completed the study you will be provided with information about sources of support.

If you have any particular concerns about this research please contact my research supervisor: Dr Victoria Clarke, Department of Health and Social Sciences, Faculty of Health

and Life Sciences, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY. Email:  
<Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk

#### **Appendix E: Indication of Consent.**

Participants were only able to proceed to the questions once they had indicated their consent to participate in the research (on Qualtrics)

I agree to participate in this research

Yes

No

☐☐

Participants were given the option to create a unique participant code to use for identification purposes should they want to withdraw their data in the future see below:

Please create your unique participant code. This code should be easily remembered by you - so please pick three words that you will easily remember (for example, the name of your primary school, your mother's maiden name, or the name of a pet - to give an example, my supervisor's participant code using these three words would be 'St Matthews Pratt Toby'):

## Appendix F: Research Questions

Which of the following colours do you prefer?

Red ☐

Blue ☐

Green ☐

Yellow ☐

You will now be asked to read and complete the first story - because detailed stories are important for my research, please spend at least 10 minutes writing the story (or aim to write around 200 words/12 lines of text).

### Choosing Red:

Story 1: Emily and Chris have been together for a while. One night Emily finds Chris masturbating ... What happens next? (Your story can unfold during the following minutes, hours, days, weeks or months.) PLEASE WRITE AT LEAST 12 LINES/200 WORDS.

Story 2: Matt and Sarah have been having sex for a while, tonight Matt suggests trying something new... What happens next? (Your story can unfold during the following minutes, hours, days, weeks or months.) PLEASE WRITE AT LEAST 12 LINES/200 WORDS.

### Choosing Blue:

Story 1: Chris and Emily have been together for a while. One night Chris finds Emily masturbating ... What happens next? (Your story can unfold during the following minutes, hours, days, weeks or months.) PLEASE WRITE AT LEAST 12 LINES/200 WORDS.

Story 2: Sarah and Matt have been having sex for a while, tonight Sarah suggests trying something new... What happens next? (Your story can unfold during the following minutes, hours, days, weeks or months.) PLEASE WRITE AT LEAST 12 LINES/200 WORDS.

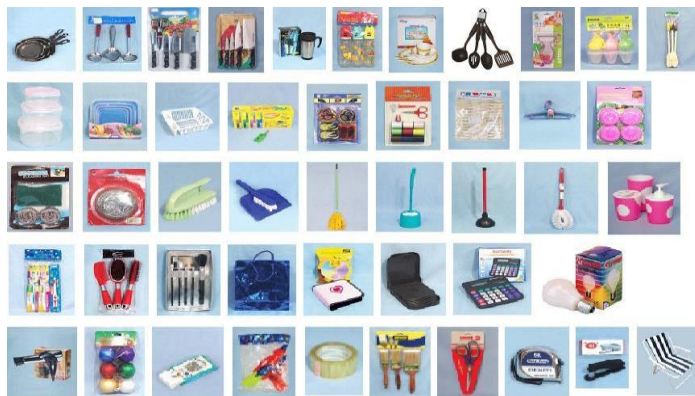
### Choosing Green:

Story 1: Matt and Sarah have been having sex for a while, tonight Matt suggests trying something new... What happens next? (Your story can unfold during the following minutes, hours, days, weeks or months.) PLEASE WRITE AT LEAST 12 LINES/200 WORDS.

## Choosing Yellow:

Story 2Chris and Emily have been together for a while. One night Chris finds Emily masturbating ... What happens next? (Your story can unfold during the following minutes, hours, days, weeks or months.) PLEASE WRITE AT LEAST 12 LINES/200 WORDS.

Which three of the following objects should not be used by a child under the age of 6 without supervision? Please click twice on any three objects which you think are not safe.



A grid of 48 headshots of diverse individuals, representing the 2016 class of fellows. The photos are arranged in four rows of twelve. The individuals vary in age, gender, and ethnicity, and are dressed in professional attire. The background of each photo is different, with some featuring flags or abstract patterns.

**Demographic Questions:**

To help me understand something about the range of people taking part in the research, I'd like to ask some questions about you. First, how old are you?

18-20

21-30

31-40

41-50

51+

**What is your sex?**

Male

Female

Other, please specify:

**How would you describe your sexuality?**

Heterosexual

Lesbian

Gay

Bisexual

Other, please specify:

**How would you describe your ethnic/racial background?****How would you describe your social class?****How would you describe your relationship status?**

Single

Partnered

**Do you consider yourself to have a disability?**

Yes, please Specify:

No:

**Are you a therapist or trainee therapist?**

Yes —————> Therapist questions (see below)

No —————> What is your profession ?

**Therapist questions only:**

**How long have you been practicing as a therapist (including the time when you were training)?**

1-5 Years

5-10 Years

11+ Years

**Have you ever attended any training on sexual issues?**

Yes

No

**In what context did you attend the training?**

As part of my therapeutic training

As part of continuing professional development

I have trained specifically as a relationship/sex therapist

**How often does your client material focus on sexual issues?**

Never

Occasionally

Often

**Which of the following options best describes your therapeutic orientation?**

Mostly Psychodynamic

Mostly Cognitive Behavioural

Mostly Humanistic

Mostly Systemic

Other, please specify:

**How did you hear about the research?**

I was emailed a link through a personal/professional contact

I saw an advert online

**Thank you for taken part in this research!**

If any of the issues raised in this research have distressed you, or if you would like to explore your relationship to sex further, or want some general sexual health advice please find some useful weblinks below:

(NB: to go directly onto the websites highlight the URL, right click and select 'go to http://:www...')

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/advice/sex\\_relationships/sex](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/advice/sex_relationships/sex) (if you are a young person and require general information on sexual health and intimacy)

[http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexualhealthtopics/Pages/Sexual-health-hub.aspx?WT.mc\\_id=110903](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexualhealthtopics/Pages/Sexual-health-hub.aspx?WT.mc_id=110903) (if you require general information on sexual health and intimacy)

<http://www.relate.org.uk/home/index.html> (if you would like to improve intimacy in your relationship)

<http://www.samaritans.org/> (if you are feeling distressed)

If you have any other questions about this research please contact my research supervisor: Dr Victoria Clarke, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Life and Health Sciences, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY Email: [Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk)

## Appendix G: Example of Social Constructionist Thematic Coding of Data

Masturbation Story (M)		<p>Thematic Analysis</p> <p>Phase 1: Reading and re-reading of data/ Noting any initial analytic observations.</p> <p>Phase 2: Systematic data coding/ identifying key features of the data.</p> <p>Phase 3: Broader patterns of meaning or 'candidate themes'.</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Generating Themes</p>
Chris Version (MC): [...] One night Emily finds Chris masturbating...	<p>Chris was shocked, embarrassed. He frequently masturbated to his favourite films when he knew Emily would not be at home. It was harmless; it hurt no one and for him, he felt, it was essential in maintaining his and Emily's relationship because his sexual drive was higher than hers and he did not want to pressurise her. On balance she offered more to him, as a friend, companion, someone he would hope to have children with, than she did not - which for him was a more exciting sexual relationship. The films offered him an outlet and more adventure than sex with Emily ever could. He also, if he was really honest, liked the 'selfish part of masturbation where he could just focus on relaxation and his own enjoyment without having to focus on Emily's enjoyment first. Chris was also aware that Emily felt insecure about her body and appearance and often trawled through magazines comparing herself to models. It was just Chris' luck that Emily walked in when he was watching a film with a beautiful model</p>	<p>Phase 1/2 Implication of infidelity being worse but an expected part? Male sex drive discourse</p> <p>Phase 1-5 Him doing his bit</p> <p>Phase 3: 'modern conscientious man'</p> <p>Phase 1 more exciting with Emily/ but Porn offers adventure-Contradictory?? Emily competing with Porn? (Have/Hold discourse)</p> <p>Phase 3 Marriage or Sex (Madonna/Whore dichotomy)</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Better than Coitus</p> <p>Phase 1 Focusing on Emily is tedious (gets in the way of male sexuality/)</p> <p>Phase 2 Normalisation of poor female body image</p> <p>Phase 1: comparing/competing poss. male attention? (Have/Hold discourse)</p> <p>Phase 3: Emotional reaction: shocked/ hurt embarrassed (= replaced/redundant?)</p>

	<p>in..... / / Emily was shocked and hurt. She was also embarrassed. Deep down, she had always known Chris probably masturbated: that was what men did and she had a feeling his sexual desire was greater than hers. But to see it in person; that was something else. Straight away Emily clocked the beautiful women in the film, how thin they were, how immaculate their make-up and how excited, yet glamorous they behaved; she knew she could not compare. In the days following the event, Emily could not shift the feeling that she was not pretty enough - or simply not enough - for Chris, however, much he reassured her. Even worse, her fears and this discovery were simply not something she felt she could share with her mother or friends. How do you tell someone you think your partner does not find you attractive, so much so that he has to resort to porn? Emily also felt protective of Chris and did not want him to become the subject of other people's gossip or judgement. She felt very alone. Eventually they talked about things, it was painful to have everything brought up but as a result they felt closer as a couple and their relationship was stronger for it.</p> <p><i>Participant No 74</i></p> <p><i>31-40 Female, Heterosexual, White, working/lower middle class, Partnered, Therapist, professional experience &lt; 5 yrs., Has had some training in sexual issues, Sex comes</i></p>	<p>Phase 1-5: Male sex drive discourse</p> <p>Phase 2: comparing/competing poss. male attention</p> <p>Phase 1: what can she learn from pornography (educational experience)</p> <p>Phase 2: Normalising high sex drive in men (Male sex drive discourse)</p> <p>Phase 2: comparing/competing poss. male attention</p> <p>Phase 1 being (sexually) excited and glamorous as anomaly (Madonna/Whore dichotomy)</p> <p>Phase 1: Emily responsible for providing sexual stimulation (assigned task she is failing at) Competition for male attention (Have/Hold discourse)</p> <p>Phase 1: Keeping up appearance? (feeling responsible for male image/ego- Emotion Work strategy to have/hold men)</p> <p>Phase 3: Communication framed as a solution to interpersonal difficulties./transformative power to turn 'problems' into 'personal/relationship growth'</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Problems as opportunities</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Communication as solution</p>
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	<p><i>up occasionally, CBT</i></p> <p>Emily loses her temper with Chris, who is extremely embarrassed. She feels that when Chris looks at porn and masturbates, that this is a sign that Chris doesn't find her very attractive. This upsets her, but rather than become sad about it, she tends to get angry with Chris. / Chris would actually like to have more sex with Emily, but doesn't want to wake her up to ask for sex when she is sleeping. So, instead, if he feels horny in the middle of the night, he tends to turn on his laptop and start looking for some exciting porn. He loves Emily very much, and sometimes feels bad about looking at porn instead of having sex with her, but the porn is simply too addictive. The internet is full of pictures and videos of women, taking off their clothes, spreading their legs and vaginas wide open, as if inviting Chris to have sex with them. He can also watch women having sex with men, having sex with other women, or having orgies with several people at the same time. As much as he loves Emily, she simply can't compete with that level of excitement. He doesn't tell her this though, and tries to keep it secret. / Chris apologizes to Emily, but she is upset for a couple of days. Eventually they make up, and end up making love. The sex is really intimate and delicious, which always makes them both wonder why they don't have sex more often.</p>	<p>Phase 3: Emotional reaction Anger (Overestimating Agency?)</p> <p>Phase 2: Competing with Pornography (Emily's role threatened/ focus on importance of female body image) responsible for having/holding</p> <p>Phase 3: Male sex drive discourse</p> <p>Phase 3: Contentious new man (him doing his bit)</p> <p>Phase1: Pornography difficult to resist/ having sex with her is the right thing to do</p> <p>Phase 2: Pornography more exciting Competing with Pornography</p> <p>Phase 1: suggesting variety in sexual practice is aspirational vs. boring routine. If Emily wanted to compete she would have to offer more variation? (Have Hold Discourse)</p> <p>Phase1: duality between sex/love (Madonna/Whore dichotomy?)</p> <p>Phase 2: Pornography more exciting Competing with Pornography</p> <p>Phase 1: lack of detail of characters emotion, simplification of interpersonal relationships?</p>
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	<p>A couple of days later, Chris is feeling horny again, but Emily is asleep. <i>He thinks about waking her up, but ends up masturbating to porn again.</i></p> <p><i>Participant No. 79</i></p> <p><i>31-40 Male, Heterosexual, White, Working/Middle, Partnered, Therapist, professional experience &lt; 5 yrs., Has not supplied any data indicating if he has had any training on sexual issues, Sex never comes up, Humanistic</i></p>	<p>Phase 1: insinuating that 'problem' have not been sufficiently 'worked through' and therefore persist</p> <p>Phase 4/5: <i>better than coitus</i></p>
	<p>As Emily pretends to be asleep she listens <i>and becomes aroused herself.</i> Gently she moans and moves closer to him so their bodies are touching. But Chris has already climaxed and fallen asleep. <i>Emily is left feeling frustrated. She touches herself and begins to masturbate too.</i> / The next day Emily feels distant from Chris wondering why <i>he hadn't wanted to make love to her. Had he been thinking of someone else? Had she done something to annoy him or perhaps he didn't find her attractive anymore.</i> / The next day Chris seemed indifferent <i>to Emily and only wanted to watch football or play computer games.</i> Emily began to wonder whether she wanted to be with him at all. / The next evening Emily decided to go out with some girlfriends. <i>If Chris was losing interest in her then perhaps there were more fish in the sea.</i> / The more Emily withdrew from Chris the more Chris seemed to want her</p>	<p>Phase 3: <i>Emotional reaction: sexually excited (Sex drive Discourse)</i></p> <p>Phase 3: <i>Secondary Emotional Reaction: Frustrated: (missing the moment)</i></p> <p>Phase 3/4/5: <i>masturbation to compensate for absent sexual partner.</i></p> <p>Phase 1: sexual closeness = emotional closeness</p> <p>Phase 2: <i>depicting men wanting sex with women as evidence that they are attractive (sex as a vehicle to communicate successful femininity)</i></p> <p>Phase 1: Emily equated with other entertainment commodities ( importance of holding male attention/ <i>have hold discourse</i>)</p> <p>Phase 2: <i>Relationships presented as an avenue to affirm</i></p>

	<p>back. But a seed of doubt was planted in Emily's mind. If Chris masturbated when she wasn't there that was one thing but not to make love to her when they were together was unforgivable. As far as she was concerned the relationship was over. /</p> <p><i>Participant No. 29</i></p> <p><i>31-40 Female, Heterosexual, White British, Middle class, Partnered, Non-Therapist, Supplied no data for profession</i></p>	<p>successful femininity/ Chris' interest a good enough reason to be in relationship</p> <p>Phase 3: Emily gender role threatened + end of relationship</p>
	<p>In his study and in front of him, on his laptop, are pictures from a porn website. Emily's first reaction is one of anger and shock, she stands there quietly. Chris is so engrossed that he doesn't notice her for a while, until he turns, shocked, slaps the lid of the laptop shut and pulls up his trousers, embarrassed. Neither say anything for a moment. Then Chris says, 'it's just nothing, it's nothing, this site just popped up in my laptop and I got carried away a little, that's all'. 'It's just guys stuff, all guys do it, you must no that. Chill out Em'. Emily rushes out and runs upstairs, surprised and shocked at her reaction, but she just can't help it. A flood of emotions take over and she buries her head in the pillow of her bed, sobbing heavily. Chris follows her upstairs and stands, silent and helpless at the door. 'Oh, I'm sorry Em', he says, 'it's just a bit of fun, it doesn't mean anything'. 'To you it doesn't,</p>	<p>Phase 3: Emotional reaction Anger (Overestimating Agency?)</p> <p>Phase 1: Masturbation presented as 'wrong' Chris sense of 'wrong doing' is shifted by normalising it and focusing on Emily's ignorance in the area of male sexuality.</p> <p>Phase 3: normalising male masturbation / Male sex drive</p> <p>Phase 2: female emotionality presented as irrational and enigmatic.</p> <p>Phase 3: Emotional reaction/ difficulty in expressing Anger?</p> <p>Phase 1: feeling helpless in face of enigmatic female</p>

<p>but to me it means a lot', sobs Emily. / / Later that evening, Emily takes her things in to the spare bedroom and goes to sleep there alone. Chris, confused, goes to find her and reaches out an arm to touch her. 'Don't touch me', she cries, 'just leave me alone'. Feeling guilty and starting to feel a little shamed, he goes back to their main bedroom and sleeps alone. Next morning the atmosphere is still frosty. Emily has clearly been crying and Chris feels helpless. Part of him feels anger, angry with her that's she making such a fuss. Emily feels angry and hurt, deeply hurt by what feels like a betrayal. 'How long have you been doing this Chris' she whispers? How long and how often? Chris mutters; well, not long, not often. They are just such beautiful girls, they are so easy to find on the internet, I like porn, you know I like porn. It's not as if I've been sleeping around with anyone else, I've not had an affair or anything. I can't see why you're so upset by it. It's just a shame you found me. It was embarrassing'. / / During the day, when Chris had gone out to play football with his mates, Emily took a sneak view at his laptop. What she found there shocked and upset her. There, in the history of the laptop was a trail of viewing that stretched back regularly over days, months even. Times when she'd thought Chris had been in his study doing some late night work, or just finishing his emails after she'd gone to bed - he'd been in his study</p>	<p>emotionality</p> <p>Phase 1: possibly feeling replaced and redundant? Phase 1: withholding sex as punishment?</p> <p>Phase 3: feeling angry for her making a fuss</p> <p>Phase 1: feeling helpless in face of enigmatic female emotionality</p> <p>Phase 2-5: Pornography difficult to resist Phase 2-5: Pornography more exciting Competing with Pornography Phase 2: compared to infidelity harmless (the modern conscientious man/ him doing his bit) Phase 2: female irrationality Phase 1: feeling helpless in face of enigmatic female emotionality</p> <p>Phase 1: sense of betrayal: sex is something that should be mutual/ not each person taking it for themselves (coital imperative?)</p>
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	<p>visiting this secret world. / /Emily found it difficult to talk to Chris about it. He became very defensive and she didn't understand quite why it upset her so. She thought she was more open-minded than to be offended, yet somehow her whole sense of herself, her confidence in her own body as sexual with Chris had been damaged by this difficult event.</p> <p><i>Participant No. 57</i></p> <p><i>41-50, Male, Heterosexual, White European, Rootless, petty bourgeois intellectual, Supplied no Data on Relationship status or Profession</i></p>	<p>Phase 2: female sexuality/poor body image</p> <p>Phase 3: Emily gender role threatened + possible end of relationship?</p>
<p>Emily Version (ME): [...] One night Chris finds Emily masturbating...</p>	<p>Chris is not able to ignore Emily masturbating or just pretend he hasn't noticed so he walks into the bedroom. He feels turned on by this and tries to walk in without interrupting her but as soon as he says her name Emily stops straight away. He goes and sits on the bed next to her and asks her what she was doing. She looks embarrassed and buries her face in the duvet, he tells her not to be and tries to kiss her but she asks him to go. He tells her he has enjoyed what he has seen and wants to stay with her. She says no that is weird and tells him to go. Later on that evening Chris asks Emily what she was thinking about, she tells Chris that she was thinking about a time they had recently had sex and she had enjoyed it.</p>	<p>Phase 2: emotional reaction: sexually excited (male sex drive Discourse)</p> <p>Phase 1: Sabotage. Wants to make the experience about him Prioritisation of male sexuality</p> <p>Phase 1: Situation presented as offering an opportunity to talk about intimate things and thereby increase intimacy in the relationship.</p>

	<p>Chris was pleased by this and Emily starts to ask him about when he masturbates. Chris is open about this. The couple are able to have a comfortable conversation about masturbation and start to feel closer and more intimate as a result of it/ / when the couple are next kissing in their bed Chris asks Emily to touch herself although unsure she does this.</p> <p><i>Participant No. 66</i></p> <p><i>21-30, Female, Heterosexual, white British, middle, Partnered, Supplied No Data for profession</i></p>	<p>Phase 3: Communication framed as a solution to interpersonal difficulties./transformative power to turn 'problems' into 'personal/relationship growth'</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Problems as opportunities</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Communication as solution</p> <p>Phase 2: masturbation framed as a performance for Chris</p>
	<p>Chris becomes overcome by a wave of emotions. The initial surge of relief was blunted by a sting of betrayal as his impotence was once again brought to focus. He had returned home earlier from work with a bottle of Tesco's finest Shiraz and some mid-range fair trade chocolate for Emily. / He had entered the hallway to be greeted by Emily's moans of pleasure wafting down the stairs from their bedroom. He had convinced himself that she was definitely in bed with another man. That creepy Romanian gardener from next door who is always paying her compliments. His legs carried him up the stairs as quickly and as nimbly as a church mouse. What was he going to do? Bludgeon him with the wine bottle? Shout at him or just fall into a heap of tears? He did not know.</p>	<p>Phase 2: relating female masturbation to defect penis?</p> <p>Idea of men as provider of sex</p> <p>Phase 1: juxtaposing male vulnerability with the socially expected role of men being aggressors</p>

	<p>He felt his heart pounding as he gaped through the door to see Emily's naked body sitting up in the bed, her head tilted back, her eyes closed, biting her lips as she lowered an object inside herself in a deft and rhythmical manner. She was alone. He saw a picture on her face, which he last saw during the first few weeks of their now 10 year relationships - a picture of unbridled contentment. / It is true they had been having problems and it is true that she had pleaded with him on countless occasions to seek relationship counselling. They had not had sex for a months since their last miscarriage. This one had taken the toll out of both of them. They had wanted so badly to have a child and he found the pressure so overwhelming that he was now not able to sustain an erection. He had fooled himself into thinking she was okay with it and that she herself was not feeling up to sex as she had not said anything to him directly. / He moved away as quietly as he had arrived at the door, caring not to alert her. Then upon reaching the front door, opened and shut it determinedly shouting "I'm home" and advanced to the kitchen downstairs. She comes down in her bathrobe looking flustered and told him she had a fever. He replied "I've been thinking... maybe we could look into this counselling thing" /</p> <p><i>Participant No. 63</i></p> <p><i>21-30, Male, Heterosexual, Black, supplied no data on</i></p>	<p>Phase 2-5: Masturbation providing a better sexual experience than coitus (better than coitus)</p> <p>Phase 1; sex is presented as an indicator of a functioning relationship</p> <p>Phase 1 (3): duality between sex/procreation (Madonna/Whore dichotomy?)</p> <p>Phase 2: sabotage?</p> <p>Phase 2: he finally acknowledges that there is a problem and as a result agrees to therapy- problem presented as offering n opportunity for relationship growth?</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Problems as opportunities</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Communication as solution</p>
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	<p><i>class, Partnered, Therapist, professional experience &lt; 5 yrs, Has attended some training on sexual issues, Sex comes up occasionally, Psychodynamic</i></p> <p>Chris cannot believe his eyes (or his luck) to finally find his partner masturbating! It is something they had openly discussed since the start of the relationship and something they both admitted to doing from time to time but never together. Chris had repeatedly asked Emily to masturbate in front of him as part of their sex but Emily was always too embarrassed and had declined. She knew though that it was something that would turn Chris on and so decided to surprise him one night. She knew that Chris got in at 5.15 every evening and he was always the first one home, she came in about an hour after. This night she left work early, showered and got herself into bed ready for when Chris came home. She was a little nervous but once she started touching herself her nerves left and she let go and started to enjoy. Chris came in as usual and came straight up to the bedroom to get get changed to find Emily naked on the bed touching herself and moaning. Chris froze for a moment and didnt know what to do.....but within seconds he kicked off his clothes and sat between Emilys legs. He began touching himself to get hard in between touching Emilys breasts. After a few minutes Emily climaxed and Chris put his hard penis inside Emily and they had rough hard sex.</p>	<p>Phase 3 Emotional Reaction: Sexually Excited.</p> <p>Phase 1: 'his luck' insinuates that it is something about him/or automatically becomes about him? Prioritisation of male sexuality</p> <p>Phase 3-5: masturbation framed as a performance for him</p> <p>Phase 2: masturbating despite initial discomfort/ fulfilling her role as enticer</p> <p>Phase 2: Emily's seduction routine worked: she is rewarded with male attention to confirm successful performance of femininity</p> <p>Phase 4/5: sex as a bargaining tool/ women rewarding men with sex</p>
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	<p><i>Participant No 82</i>  <i>31-40, Female Heterosexual, white, working, Partnered, Therapist, professional experience &lt; 5 yrs, never had any training in sexual issues, Sex comes up occasionally, Humanistic</i></p> <p>Chris is initially taken aback to find Emily masturbating <i>without him</i>, as this is the first time that he's caught her doing this. He <i>immediately feels a mix of conflicting emotions - arousal at her pleasuring herself, surprise that she is doing this, and also some shame</i> that he has caught her doing something that he "shouldn't have" (because this is her 'private time'). <i>He briefly considers whether he should pretend that he is still asleep and 'leave her to it' - or whether he should join in. Mulling this over, he becomes increasingly turned on by the thought of watching her masturbate while he pleasures himself.</i> Plucking up some courage, he then asks her if it is alright if he joins in by watching. She agrees and they continue to pleasure themselves alongside each other. <i>He wants to hold off coming until she does, but realises that it may take some time, so asks if she needs a hand. Ultimately, he wants to have penetrative sex.</i> She agrees, and they proceed to have sex. <i>Sometime afterwards, he wonders if there is some need that he isn't meeting in her,</i> but doesn't feel confident asking her about this in case the answer that he gets is one that he doesn't want to hear. This continues to eat away at him, and he</p>	<p>Phase 1: Presenting Emily's masturbation as something she should do with him? <i>Reciprocity discourse/coital imperative</i></p> <p>Phase 3: Emotional reaction: Surprise and shame</p> <p>Phase 2: Some thinking about the implications of his possible actions</p> <p>Phase 3: Cognitive efforts are impaired by increasing sexual arousal, (<i>offloading responsibility for action unto an uncontrollable sexuality</i>) <i>Male sex drive discourse</i></p> <p>Phase 3: Presented as a conscientious modern man faced with the impossible task of managing female sexual responses.</p> <p>Phase 4/5: <i>Female orgasm more difficult to achieve than male orgasm. Male as expert of female body? Giving her a had</i></p> <p>Phase 2: <i>He wants to have coitus</i></p> <p>Phase3: <i>his cognitive abilities return post coitus, he is presented as being reflective about his behaviour after</i></p>
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	<p>eventually plucks up enough courage to have an adult conversation about it. Strangely enough, the thought that he masturbates on his own all the time doesn't seem to cross his mind.</p> <p>31-40/Gay/White/Married/</p>	<p>his sexual needs have been met</p> <p>Phase 1: half-hearted attempt at addressing issues within the relationship, but issues remain?</p>
Sexual Experimentation Story (SE)		<p>Thematic Analysis</p> <p>Phase 1: Reading and re-reading of data/ Noting any initial analytic observations.</p> <p>Phase 2: Systematic data coding/ identifying key features of the data.</p> <p>Phase 3: Broader patterns of meaning or 'candidate themes'.</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Generating Themes</p>
<p>Matt Version (SEM):</p> <p>[...] tonight Matt suggests trying something new...</p>	<p>Matt would like to try anal sex but Sarah is not curious about it. Some of her friends do it often and enjoy it, but she did not enjoy her experience with her adolescent boyfriend. She is afraid to try it again and hurt and she is annoyed that he asks during sex. / She answers that if they will try it should be prepared first and discussed properly. He tries to lure her into it as a simple thing but she refuses with no and with her body, telling him it is not funny at all. / Later in the same week she explains him that she knows how it works and that she hurt the first time that it is now something she wishes to repeat again. He says he never tried it and would really like to</p>	<p>Phase 3: Anal Sex</p> <p>Phase 2: Other Characters (multiple view points)</p> <p>Phase 3: Emotional Reaction: Afraid of pain (having had experience of pain in the past)</p> <p>Phase 1: doesn't rule it out/ fear/ setting boundaries</p> <p>Phase 1: disrespecting boundaries by attempting to have sex despite her having said no.</p> <p>Phase 1: weighing up her negative experience against his curiosity</p>

	<p>know how it is. / Then she tells him that she has already talked with female friends who enjoy it and that it has some precautions to take: they should use a condom (for some years they only do hormonal contraception), they should buy lubricant and he needs to respect her pace and make her feel relaxed. / She assertively states that she is willing to do anal sex with him to please him, not because she wishes to; but with one condition: he should also be penetrated by her with a dildo. / Matt is shocked and says he is not curious on anal because he is gay and that he has no interest in being penetrated. Sarah laughs and says she did not think only gay men could enjoy anal sex, that she thinks it is a matter of equality in sex - if she does that for him then he should also do that for her, which requires similar preparation (condom use, lubricant, relaxation and confidence in the other). / Matt spends some weeks without mentioning it and then he admits it is a matter of justice and equality and that he never thought she would ask him that. / They try it and feel the relationship grew in confidence. They laugh about the situation in the future and continue to do it irregularly.</p> <p><i>Participant No 78</i></p> <p><i>31-40, Female, Bisexual, white, medium, Partnered,</i></p>	<p>Phase 2: Made enquiries. Its normalising anal sex/ sexual experimentation: there is a right/safe way to do it. Something about catering to/prioritisation of male sexuality/</p> <p>Phase 3: willing to undergo discomfort for the sake of point/ reciprocity of discomfort/ an attempt to address power imbalances (women only)</p> <p>Phase 2: double standard of Anal sex Phase 2: sexual practice a vehicle to demonstrate sexual orientation?</p> <p>Phase 4/5: an attempt to address power imbalances (women only)- note absence of pleasure discourse</p> <p>Phase 2: transformative power to turn 'problems' into 'personal/relationship growth' Phase 4/5: Problems as opportunities Phase 4/5: Communication as solution</p>
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	<p><i>Therapist, Professional experience 6-10yrs, Have had some training on sexual issues, sex comes up frequently in therapy, CBT</i></p> <p>Matt cooks dinner for Sarah and sets the mood for a 'love in' he's been wanting to suggest anal sex for a while but doesn't know how Sarah will respond. He doesn't want to risk what they have got together but also feels like he'd like to be a bit more adventurous. / / The evening is going well and they are both turned on and keen to get close. Naked and in front of the log burner Matt says 'I want to try something new are you up for it?' / / Sarah looks a little concerned and says 'what?....I thought this was all really good with us?' Matt: 'it is, but I've always wanted to try anal and never felt like I could ask anyone before' Matt now looks embarrassed and says 'it doesn't matter really' 'forget I said anything!' Sarah smiles and said 'so you've never tried?' Matt: 'no...but it doesn't matter now, it feels like I've ruined the moment!' / / Sarah explained that she had tried once, when she was a lot younger, but found it too painful, but is willing to try again if he promises to be really gentle. Matt smiles and says that he will be! / / Following a night of gentle love making Matt and Sarah talked about fantasies and realities and how talking makes it easier as the worst that could happen is someone say no or that's just too weird!!</p>	<p>Phase 1: the idea of 'scene setting' (male effort/attention increases the onus on women to 'reward' men?) Phase 4/5: sex as a bargaining tool/ women rewarding men with sex</p> <p>Phase 3: suggestions of Anal Sex</p> <p>Phase 3: reason for making suggestion is to 'be' adventurous (note absence of pleasure discourse)</p> <p>Phase 3: emotional reaction: self doubt</p> <p>Phase 2: matt offering exclusivity of experience/ I am only asking you/ tapping into female competitiveness for male attention</p> <p>Phase 2: Retracting suggestion</p> <p>Phase 4/5: There is a 'moment' in sexual relationship that can be ruined. Drawing on discourse around sex magically progressing without communication/ problematic for Consent</p>
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	<p>As a result their relationship grew closer and more intimate</p> <p><i>Participant No. 96</i></p> <p><i>41-50, Male, Heterosexual, white British, working, Partnered, Therapist, professional experience 11+, Never attended any training on sexual issues, Sex come up frequently in therapy, Systemic</i></p>	<p>Phase 3: despite discomfort and pain/ Emily willing to try again for exclusivity with Matt/ satisfy need for male attention etc</p> <p>Phase 2: transformative power to turn 'problems' into 'personal/relationship growth' through communication</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Problems as opportunities</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Communication as solution</p>
	<p>Sarah listens, interested in what he's suggesting. He's suggesting they assume a bit of role-play and that she takes on a role where she's a bit subordinate and he's the boss. She laughs a bit, in a good hearted way. Not mocking him, but enjoying his idea and thinking it's quite fun to try new things. But she suggests actually that she be the boss and he's the one who is a bit subordinate, and she suggests in fact that he's very subordinate, and will need to do exactly what he's told, or he'll be in trouble. She says this in quite a firm voice, already assuming her role of choice. She looks at him directly in the eye, waiting to see if he'll join in with her suggestion. He looks back, thinking for a second or two, enjoying the fact that she's going with the flow and a bit surprised that she's taking his idea in a different direction. He says 'whatever you say. I'll do whatever you say' and he looks</p>	<p>Phase 3: emotional reaction: interested</p> <p>Phase 3: suggesting submissive/dominant Role play (BDSM)</p> <p>Phase 3-5: Phase 3: an attempt to address power imbalances (women only)</p> <p>Phase 2: Problematic representation of consent within BDSM?</p>

	<p>down. He's still, doesn't move, and doesn't say any more. Sarah tells him to stand up, meaning he has to get off the bed. She gets comfortable on the bed and takes her time, instructing him so that he does things to her that are fantastic and make her feel amazing. Her instructions are clear and gentle but firm, and he does as he is told. They carry on having sex in this way for a good while until she orgasms and they hold each other tightly and drop off to sleep.</p> <p><i>Participant No 6</i>  <i>31-40, Female, White British, Middle Partnered, Non-Therapist, Academic Management (HE)</i></p>	<p>Phase 2: idea around women being sexually pleased only in the context of role play that allows them to be directive? (possibly, being clear about sexual needs irreconcilable with heteronormative ideas of femininity)</p>
	<p>"I'm sorry mat but I really don't fancy have anal sex. I know someone who had a prolapsed rectum after her husband insisted on having anal sex with her. She only let him do it every birthday and anniversary but she ended up at a and e with her bum hanging out" / "oh come on sarah. that's just an isolated incident. everyone's doing it these days. I was out drinking with my nephew last week, he is only 22 and he was boasting that he's done it with 3 girls! we've been together now for 5 years and I've never been pushy about anything. what do you reckon?" / "no, I don't want to" / matt starts to sulk and the moment is lost - they don't finish having regular sex and both turn over and go to sleep. / matt keeps pestering her over the</p>	<p>Phase 3: suggestion: Anal sex</p> <p>Phase 2: additional characters to include multiple viewpoints?</p> <p>Phase 2-5: normalising sexual experimentation (A demonstration of being normal)</p> <p>Phase 3: additional characters to create a hierarchy of sex acts.</p> <p>Phase 3: Presenting a modern conscientious male who is not pushy (for 5 years, hence should be rewarded for this now?)</p> <p>Phase 4/5: sex as a bargaining tool/ women rewarding</p>

	<p>next 6 months and eventually one night when they have drunk 4 bottles of wine between them he tries again. at first sarah says no but they are having doggystyle and matt harasses her so much that she finally gives in. he manages to enter her and they have drunken anal sex. / the next day sarah is very sore and they both have terrible hangovers. she accuses him of taking advantage of her when she is drunk. He tries to make up excuses but its half hearted. it transpires that he feels he was within his rights to push for anal as he had made a lot of sacrifices to be with her. Sarah loses trust in matt and their sex life gets worse and worse. finally, she leaves him.</p> <p><i>Participant No 89</i></p> <p><i>41-50, Male, Heterosexual, white working, Partnered Therapist, 6-10yrs, Have had some training on sexual issues, sex comes up occasionally, Systemic</i></p>	<p>men with sex</p> <p>Phase 4/5: 'the moment' – communication/negotiating consent ruins the magic of sex</p> <p>Phase 2: problematic depiction of consent/ Sarah coerced into sex acts</p> <p>Phase 2: recognition that the way consent is represented is acknowledged</p> <p>Phase 4/5: sex as a bargaining tool/ women rewarding men with sex</p> <p>Phase 2: relationship breakdown due to her not wanting to cater to his needs?</p>
<p>Sarah Version (SES):</p> <p>[...] tonight Sarah suggests trying something new...</p>	<p>Matt says "what did you have in mind?" Sarah says "I am not sure, something....different". They both think for a while and then Matt suggests anal sex. Sarah gives him a look and says "not that different". Sarah then is quiet for a minute or two and then says "well I could give you a tit wank? I have never done it before but my friends have</p>	<p>Phase 1: writer circumvents the idea of Sarah suggesting something new, (struggle with autonomous female sexuality?) note absence discourse of pleasure</p> <p>Phase 3: suggestion of Anal Sex</p> <p>Phase 3: Sarah suggest another way she could please/pleasure Matt (absent discourse of female sexual</p>

	<p>and I want to try it". Matt has watched lots of porn and so manoeuvres Sarah into the position and they do it for a while. Matt loves it, and Sarah says it was ok, and nice to see him be so turned on. "but it doesn't really do anything for you does it?" matt says, "I want to find something that turns you on as well". Sarah cant think of anything, tit wank was the rudest thing she could think of that she'd be comfortable doing. Matt says "hey, girls always dress up, do you want me to dress up as something?" Sarah thinks. "Like what, a fireman?" Matt says "depends if you like fireman". Sarah doesn't, and racks her brains to think of something she does like. "I've got it! Mr. Darcy!" So matt gets some britches and wets his white work shirt whilst speaking in a posh accent and they have sex.</p> <p><i>Participant No 69</i></p> <p><i>21-30, Female, Heterosexual, white British, lower middle, Partnered, Therapist, professional experience &lt; 5 yrs., never had any training on sexual issues, sex never come up in therapy, CBT</i></p>	<p>desire)</p> <p>Phase 3: Pornography presented as a legitimate source of knowledge about sex, Matt position as the expert'</p> <p>Phase 3: prioritising of male sexuality</p> <p>Phase 3: hierarchical valuation of sex act with 'rudest' at the top of the hierarchy, Also the assumption that women would be uncomfortable doing 'rude' things? Having to make yourselves do it to keep up with ever changing insatiable male sexuality??</p> <p>Phase 2: Matt positioned as more knowledgeable about female sexuality than Sarah</p> <p>Phase 2: Sarah positioned as sexually inexperienced</p> <p>Phase 2: 'Darcy' = desexualisation and Romanisation of women's sexuality.</p>
	<p>Sarah suggest 'spicing-up' their sex life - she wants to introduce sex toys and masturbate while Matt's penis is inside her, as she sits on top of him. Sarah wants to feel in-charge. Matt is horrified. His immediate reaction is to</p>	<p>Phase 2: Drawing on a experimentation imperative</p> <p>Phase 3-5: she wants to feel in charge (sexual experimentation as a way to address power imbalance)</p>

<p>recoil and say @I'm man enough' you don't need that rubbish - you've got me and I'M A REAL MAN, AREN'T I? Matt takes Sarah's suggestion as a personal insult to his masculinity. / / During the night this plays on his mind. It reminds him of all the times he feels Sarah has undermined him, and he begins to wonder about her other sexual experiences. Is my style not good enough? My penis too small? Will she leave me if I can't satisfy her, and maybe Sarah just fakes having orgasms. Matt feels mortally wounded. / / At breakfast Matt raises the issues yet Sarah is in a hurry to get to work and suggests they talk later. She finds it hard to understand how Matt has take trying something new so personally. It was meant to be shared and for his pleasure too. / / That night Matt can contain his hurt n longer and they 'have it out' - there is a blazing row, he brings up all the other times he has felt hurt and shouts at Sarah. She wonders 'Is this the man I love', what's happened. Ok, we can carry on with sex as we were, it was good. Was good? screams Matt, was? What's that supposed to mean, I suppose your last boyfriend made you cum no problem! / / The arguments continue, the insecurities grow and cracks in the relationships appear. Reluctantly, Matt agrees to couple therapy. / / (other than the going to therapy part, this parallels a the narrative of a female client I am working with).</p>	<p>Phase 3: emotional reaction: horrified (anxious /self-doubt) Threat to/undermining of his masculinity</p> <p>Phase 1: sense of competition to previous partners</p> <p>Phase 3: Insecurities and self-doubt are expressed through aggression against the other person</p> <p>Phase 2: appeasing him? (emotion work/looking after male ego)</p> <p>Phase 3: presenting a female sexuality that is dependent on Men 'made you cum' performance pressure etc.</p> <p>Phase 2: transformative power to turn 'problems' into 'personal/relationship growth' through communication</p>
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	<p><i>Participant No. 111</i></p> <p><i>41-50, Male, Heterosexual, White British, Middle class, Partnered, Therapist, professional experience 11+, Has had some training on sexual issues, sex comes up frequently, Integrative</i></p>	<p>Phase 4/5: Problems as opportunities</p> <p>Phase 4/5: Communication as solution</p> <p>Phase 3: distancing oneself from the narrative</p>
	<p>Sarah suggests that she and Matt roleplay that she is a sex worker. She wants him to knock on the door, and she will let him in, all dressed up. She will perform and he will pay. He likes the idea but jokes that she won't be getting to keep the money. That's ok, she says, let's use Monopoly money. / Sarah is more often the one to bring something new to their sexual relationship. Although the familiarity of their relationship is nice and makes for very satisfying sex, she craves a new thrill sometimes. She knows Matt enjoys that feeling of 'newness' too but he suggests things less often, probably because he doesn't think about sex as much as she does. / Sarah is a feminist. She has no problem with dressing up, playing the whore. But she does worry about other things. She doesn't share these worries with Matt, or anyone else. She worries that, however much she loves Matt, monogamy with a man won't always work for her. Sometimes she misses the touch and kiss and delicious feel of another woman's skin so much it aches. They can't roleplay that.</p>	<p>Phase: Role play (BDSM)</p> <p>Phase: Women's sexuality as performance (sexual object)</p> <p>Phase: familiar relationship framed as boring compared to 'adventurous' sexual experimentation.</p> <p>Phase1/2: caveat to presenting a objectified version of female sexuality 'sex worker scenario'</p> <p>Irrelevant identification of feminism with views on sexual role play</p> <p>Phase 1: presenting Sarah as really interested in women</p>

	<p><i>Participant No 21</i></p> <p><i>31-40, Female, Bisexual, White, Middle, Partnered, Non-Therapist, PhD student</i></p>	<p>maybe suggesting that an agentic female sexuality encounters barriers within heteronormative relationship structure perhaps?</p>
	<p>Sarah suggests they should try anal sex, Sarah had experience of this kind of intercourse with a previous partner and enjoyed it occasionally but also felt a little ashamed or dirty after doing it as she felt that it was still quite a taboo. Sarah suggested partly because she thought that men in general liked to have anal sex and she wanted to please her new partner whom she was beginning to fall in love with. Matt was a little surprised when Sarah made the anal sex suggestion and did not know how to respond immediately afterwards. Matt had never tried anal sex before despite having several sexual partners and was not sure whether he really wanted to or not at that point, partly due to a lack of experience and partly because he was still not sure if he actually liked the idea of anal intercourse. Sarah noticed that her suggestion appeared to catch matt by surprise so she quickly followed up by saying that it didn't matter if he didn't want to and that it could wait for another day - by now she began to think that perhaps matt had not done anal sex before and she began to worry that he might think she was dirty or slutty. Matt started to feel slightly</p>	<p>Phase 3: suggestion Anal sex 'because all men like it' presenting a male sexuality that can be generalised and a female sexuality that should cater to it</p> <p>Phase 1-3: Sarah's feeling of shame related to social acceptance</p> <p>Phase 1-5: Sarah's suggestion framed as entirely focused on catering to male sexuality. Thereby keeping within the gender role of enticer of sex'/ as opposed to seeking out sexual experimentation to meet own needs.</p> <p>Phase 2: rewarding love with sex acts despite discomfort Sex as bargaining tool</p> <p>Phase 1: managing male ego/emotion (discomfort) by retracting suggestions (strategy to have/hold men - emotion work)</p>

	<p>uneasy at the thought of his girlfriend having anal sex with previous partners and this also made him feel somewhat inadequate and insecure, again Sarah sensed this and decided to reassure him that everything was okay - although inside she was beginning to regret making the suggestion.</p> <p><i>Participants No. 54</i></p> <p><i>31-40, Male, Heterosexual, white British, lower, middle, Partnered, Non-Therapist, SND</i></p>	<p>Phase: idea of women carrying sexual value which can be diminished (dirty and slutty)/ increased (more desirable) by certain acts</p> <p>Phase 1: The idea of previous partners diminishing the 'value' of women.</p> <p>Phase 3 : managing male ego strategy to have/hold men</p> <p>Phase 1: regretting making the suggestion as it failed to achieve the desired outcome (increase her hold on his attention)</p>
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**Appendix H: Journal Article intended for the submission to Psychology and Psychotherapy:****Theory Research and Practice****Overview**

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**Aims and Scope**

Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory Research and Practice (formerly The British Journal of Medical Psychology) is an international scientific journal with a focus on the psychological aspects of mental health difficulties and well-being, and psychological problems and their psychological treatments including:

- theoretical and research development in the understanding of cognitive and emotional factors in psychological disorders;
- interpersonal attitudes;
- behaviour and relationships; vulnerability to, adjustment to, assessment of, and recovery (assisted or otherwise) from psychological disorders;
- psychological therapies (including both process and outcome research) where mental health is concerned.

**Therapists' and non-therapists' constructions of heterosex:****A qualitative story completion study**

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Word count: 6,502 (excluding abstract, figures, tables and references)

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## Therapists' and non-therapists' constructions of heterosex:

### A qualitative story completion study

#### Abstract

**Objectives:** This paper examines the differences and similarities in the discourses underpinning therapists' and non-therapists' constructions of sexual experimentation in heterosexual relationships.

**Design:** Following Kitzing and Powell (1995) pioneering adaptation of the story completion method for qualitative analysis, this research used a qualitative story completion (SC) design.

**Methods:** One hundred story completions written by 50 therapists and 50 non-therapists, were gathered online and analysed using constructionist thematic analysis.

**Results:** Therapists and non-therapists were as likely to draw on heteronormative understandings of sex, sexuality and sexual practice to make sense of sexual experimentation; 48% of the all stories constructed sexual experimentation as a demonstration of being normal, while 16% of the stories written by women depicted sexual experimentation as an attempt to address power imbalances. Therapists' were more likely to frame 'difficulties' within relationships as opportunities for personal growth and increased emotional depth, and they included greater emotional complexity and more internal and external dialogue in their narratives.

**Conclusion:** These findings point towards a gap in practitioner training that may result in an overreliance on narrow and restrictive discourses of heterosex. This paper concludes that

fostering a critical stance in psychologists is crucial to effective clinical leadership that meets a wider social justice agenda.

**Practitioner Points:**

- Clinical training of sexual issues is largely absent from practitioner training courses, which results in therapists being ill equipped to respond to growing public anxiety about sexual issues.
- Psychologists are increasingly taking up positions of clinical leadership and are more and more looked to for models of best practice, drawing on informed and socially critical positions in their understanding of people's distress around sex is therefore paramount for....

**Key words:** Psychologists, coital imperative, heteronormative, sex therapy, thematic analysis, therapeutic training

### Introduction

Western culture has been described as sex-saturated (Attwood, 2006, 2009; Gill, 2007, 2012). Sexualised imagery in advertising and popular media is common place (Gill, 2007, 2009; Gill & Sharff, 2011). Pornography has become readily available on the internet (Attwood, 2006; Mulholland, 2015) and previously marginalised sexual practices such as Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism (BDSM) are more visible in the public domain (Barker, 2013; Barrett, 2007; Weiss, 2006). Moreover 'sexual products and services are becoming increasingly accessible and the development of communication technologies to support, replace or reconfigure sexual encounters are increasingly part of ordinary people's everyday lives' (Attwood, 2006, p. 82). The overwhelming message is that

‘everyone is always ready, willing and able to have sex’ (Miracle, Miracle & Baumeister, 2002, p. 101).

Alongside an increasingly pornographic mainstream media, people are more and more concerned about what constitutes ‘normal’ sexual functioning and driven to seek interventions to improve sexual performance (Barker, 2011; Kaschak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2001, 2003, 2008, 2012). In recent years, sexual experimentation has increasingly been portrayed as an essential and necessary aspect of ‘healthy’ heterosexual relationships to prevent difficulties in relationships and intimacy or as first port of call to overcome problems (Farvid & Braun, 2013, 2006; Harvey & Gill, 2001). In their analysis of sex advice in popular magazines, Farvid and Braun (2013, 2006) found that sexual experimentation was presented as a reliable strategy for women to ‘have’ and ‘hold’ men in relationships (Hollway 1989) and for men to demonstrate their sexual prowess and superiority. This was echoed in Harvey and Gill’s (2011) commentary on the Channel 4 TV show *‘The Sex Inspectors’* (2007), which showed that sexual experimentation was consistently advocated as a legitimate avenue to achieve better relationships and greater sexual satisfaction.

However, despite a sharp increase in range and availability of expert advice, anxiety about sex has not shifted over the last two decades (Angel, 2012; Moran & Lee, 2013; Pronier & Monk-Turnera, 2014; Tiefer, 2012). Sexual difficulties remain common; the most recent British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL-3) reported anxiety related difficulties during ‘intercourse’ in 42% of men and 51% of women (Mitchell, Mercer, Ploubidis, Jones, Datta, et al., 2013). The National Health Service (NHS) in Britain attempted

to address people's anxiety about sex, by launching a major media campaign entitled, 'Sex worth talking about' (NHS, 2009) designed to encourage Britons to bring sexual difficulties to their treating clinician. Although the campaign was primarily aimed at health professionals, it opened up a dialogue among psychological therapists about whether training adequately equips them to have conversations about sex, and which frameworks their work should draw on (Hill, 2013; Moon, 2011; Pukall, 2009).

Training on sexual issues offered to UK psychologists on doctoral training programmes is argued to be insufficient, an issue which has been consistently highlighted since the 1970s, yet remains unresolved (Bruni, 1974; Yarris & Allegeier, 1988; Baker, 1990; Hill, 2013; Moon, 2008, 2009, 2011; Pukal, 2009). Indeed, of the fourteen counselling psychology courses accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS), very few include modules focusing specifically on sexuality (Hill, 2013 [see <http://www.bps.org.uk> for a full list of courses and links to the modules]). Teaching allocated to sexual issues has been noted to be between 2-16 hours over the course of a 5 to 7 year training programme (Moon, 2009).

The reluctance to put sex on training agendas for therapists has been regarded as an expression of cultural shame around sexual issues that mutes frank discussion about sex in public arenas (Hill, 2013; Pukall, 2009). Clients who do disclose sexual difficulties to therapists are often told that their difficulties cannot be addressed as part of their psychological treatment and are subsequently referred on to specialist services (Barker, 2011; Pukall, 2009). In her article, 'No sex please, we are counsellors!' Clarkson (2003) identified a general reluctance amongst therapists to talk about sexual material. Hill (2013) argued that clients' willingness to disclose is influenced by a therapist's ability to invite disclosure. Clients 'test'

their therapists' ability to hear sexual concerns by discussing related topics, such as intimacy, and therapists communicate their anxiety about sexual material by failing to recognise, and respond positively to, invitations to probe further (Hill, 2013). This inability to respond to clients' cues communicates that sexual concerns are not appropriate for therapy (Hill, 2013; Hill, Thompson, Cogar & Denman, 1993; Miller & Byers, 2008, 2011).

Miller and Byers (2008, 2011) found that therapists' ability to respond to sexual concerns related not only to their confidence as practitioners but also to their political views. They found that trainee therapists' discomfort with sexual matters correlated with high scores on conservatism as measured by the 10-item sexual conservatism scale (Burt, 1980). This suggests that therapists' personal experiences, as well as their political and cultural views, bear heavily on the scope for therapy when it comes to working with sexual material.

In her classic exploration of the permeable boundary between the consulting room and the wider culture, Hare-Mustin (1994) introduced the concept of a 'mirrored' (therapy) room to illustrate how the same discourses that govern the outside world determine what happens in therapy. Therapists are not immune to cultural and political influence and therapeutic approaches are equally influenced by the underlying ideology of the culture in which they develop. As Hadjiosif (2015) points out: 'therapy does not take place in a moral vacuum' (p. 310), and without a rigorous interrogation of the belief systems that a particular therapeutic approach draws upon, therapists may become unwitting perpetrators of such beliefs. Therapist discomfort is thus invariably shaped by their underlying assumptions about sex, and such assumptions will in turn influence their therapeutic interaction with clients. Cultural assumptions about sex, and therapist's tendencies to adopt mainstream views about

sexual problems, have been a main focus of feminist scholarship. The consequences of accepting current approaches to sexual problems are summarised here in order to highlight the importance for alternative ways of making sense of sexual problems.

### **Feminist Challenges to Current Approaches to Sex Problems**

Feminist sexologists advocate a social approach to understanding people's anxieties about sex, arguing that social pressures around sexual performance and people's desire to be normal are key to constituting such anxiety (Denman, 2004; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2001, 2008, 2012). Feminist and queer<sup>12</sup> scholars have argued that current approaches to sex therapy are predominantly informed by the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) nomenclature and underpinned by cognitive-behavioural perspectives (Barker, 2011; Denman, 2004; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 2004, 2012; Tiefer, 2001, 2008, 2012). DSM nomenclature and the goal orientated nature of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)<sup>13</sup> produce binary distinctions between 'normal' and 'abnormal' sexual functioning, which perpetuate heteronormative version of 'good', 'normal' and 'natural' sex, largely conceptualised as penile-vagina penetration resulting in orgasm, where the man takes an active role and the woman a passive one (Denman, 2004; Gavey, 2005; Jackson, 1993; Jeffreys, 1990; Nicolson, 1993;

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<sup>12</sup> Queer theory emerged in the 1990s out of post-structuralist ideas of deconstruction and a commitment to highlighting issues of power in the social constructions of sexual identity. Queer theorists challenge the binary construction of the sexes, genders and sexualities, campaigning for more fluid models of sexuality and advocating social change through the systematic deconstruction of binary positions (Butler, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> CBT is based on the principle that negative patterns of thought about the self and the world are the root cause of psychological distress. Treatment is underpinned by the idea that maladaptive behaviour is learnt and can therefore be unlearned. Negative thought patterns are challenged through behavioural experiments, which are thought to result in the learning of more adaptive behaviour and the subsequent decrease in psychological distress (Beck, 1975).

Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). Feminist sexological scholars (such as The Working Group on a New View of Women's Sexual Problems<sup>14</sup>, 2004) have expressed ongoing concern about the influence of both DSM distinctions of function and dysfunction and cognitive-behavioural frameworks on mainstream approaches to sex therapy, arguing that they are reductionist and tend to favour bodily mechanics over the meanings of sexual encounters. Rather than offering medically informed treatments for 'problems', they argue that therapists should highlight, what Foucault (2003) called, 'the regulatory power' of social discourse on individuals' relationship with their own sexuality and offer clients ways of contextualising their desire to be normal (Kleinplatz, 2012).

### The Challenge for Psychologists

Due to psychologists' influence on wider standards of therapeutic practice, it is particularly important for them to engage with frameworks that equip them to interrogate the social, cultural, historical and political environments in which they work (Milton et al., 2002). In 2007, the British Psychological Society, in partnership with the Department of Health (DoH), issued a document entitled *New Ways of Working for Applied Psychologists* (Onyett, 2007), which was aimed at encouraging psychological leadership in NHS mental health services. One identified facet of effective psychological leadership was the ability to offer authoritative alternatives to the medical model (Onyett, 2007). Psychologists' roles in the NHS have changed from working predominantly in isolation to being increasingly

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<sup>14</sup> The New View Campaign was formed in 2000 as a grassroots network of feminist academics (Alperstein, L.; Ellison, C.; Fishman, J. R.; Hall, M.; Handwerker, L.; Hartley, H. Kaschak, E.; Kleinplatz, Loe, M.; Mamo, L.; Tavis, C; Tiefer, L.) to challenge the discourses about sexuality that the pharmaceutical industry draws on to market new medication. The goal of the New View Campaign is to expose biased research and promotional methods that serve corporate profit rather than people's pleasure and satisfaction (<http://www.newviewcampaign.org>).

integrated into teams. In the document, Onyett outlines how psychologists in the NHS are expected to take up roles of clinical and organisational governance and are therefore increasingly looked towards as providing examples of best practice. Psychologists' authority in mental health settings means that their practice influences not only their work with clients but has implications for the surrounding care systems and wider society. The underlying theoretical assumptions that training courses instil in trainees therefore reflect not only pedagogical choices, but political ones (Bentall, 2004, 2010; Johnstone, 2000; Moon, 2007, 2008, 2011). The extent to which critical frameworks are taught on training programmes has been questioned and the need for trainees to be made aware of the political implications of their practice has been repeatedly emphasised (Bentall, 2004, 2010; Johnstone, 2000; Moon, 2007, 2008, 2011). Moon (2011) proposed the inclusion of queer challenges to the understanding of gender and sexuality on doctoral training programmes. She suggests that queer theory in particular 'provides new ground for rethinking, re-contextualizing and recognizing present-day therapeutic practices by questioning taken-for-granted knowledge' (Moon, 2011, p. 195). Training for psychologists in sexual issues should therefore not only focus on increasing trainees' awareness of their own discomfort when discussing sex but also introduce trainees to critical, social constructionist writing on sex therapy in order to serve a wider social justice agenda.

Using the story completion (SC) method, this paper examines the differences and similarities in the underlying assumptions that therapists and non-therapists draw on in their construction of sexual experimentation in heterosexual relationships. The use of sexual experimentation in the story stem is not only a contemporary and familiar sexual scenario

but also one that may elicit participants' negotiation of prescriptive ideas of 'normal' (hetero) sex (Barker, 2011; Kleinplatz, 2012; Tiefer, 2008). Thus, this paper has two aims that expand the existing literature: to examine how heteronormative constructions of sexual practice continue to constrain people's assumptions about sex, provide unequal access to power and hold the potential to increase psychological distress about sex.

### Methodology

SC was introduced to qualitative research by Kitzinger and Powell in 1995, having previously been used in clinical contexts (Rabin & Zlotogorski, 1981), and quantitative developmental research (e.g., Bretherton, Prentiss & Ridgeway, 1990). SC is a form of projective technique, designed to overcome barriers to direct self-report, particularly barriers of awareness (a person's lack of awareness of their own emotions) and barriers of admissibility (the subject's difficulty in admitting certain emotions) (Moore, Gullone and Kostanski, 1997). Asking participants to write hypothetical scenarios about other people's behaviour allows them to 'relax their guard' and write with less reserve than if they were asked about their own behaviour directly (Will, Eadie & MacAskill, 1996). Social desirability is a particular issue when researching therapists as therapeutic training encourages a detached and overt 'politically correct' stance in therapists, which may mask underlying socially undesirable views (Tribe, 2015). Using a comparative design allows a sensitive exploration of how different social groups are represented in wider culture (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

In line with previous SC research which employed a social constructionist framework to explore heterosex and heterosexual relationships (Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2012) the authors reject an essentialist reading of SC data in favour of

a constructionist analysis of the discourses in the data that dominate and shape participants' cultural understandings around heterosex. As such, this research is not aiming to draw any conclusions about participants' own experiences of heterosex; the aim is to explore the social discourses utilised by participants as they attempt to make sense of the scenarios described in the story stems.

Data analysis grounded in a social constructionist epistemology examines how discourses govern our socio-cultural environment (Mills, 2004; Sunderland, 2004), with the ultimate aim of making the invisible social structures that constrain and restrict certain ways of being, visible. Thus a social constructionist interrogation of the data involves the process of searching for discursive patterns in participants' writing, that serve to construct particular social 'truths' about heterosexuality (Butler, 2004).

### **Research Design**

Participants were presented with the start of a story, a story stem, about a heterosexual couple in a sexual relationship: Sarah and Matt. Following previous SC research (e.g. Clarke et al. 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Frith, 2013; Kizinger & Powell 1995; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2012), there were two versions of the story (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The design therefore created three possible comparative levels of analysis: The first level allowed comparisons between the discourses underpinning the differences in the constructions of the female and the male character; the second level allowed comparisons between the differences in the discourses underpinning the stories of therapeutically-trained

participants compared to those who have not been therapeutically trained. If grouped according to gender, the second interpretative level also allowed for an analysis of how the gender of the participants interacted with the stories produced. The third level allowed analysis of the relationship between participant gender and the experience of training. These three levels are represented in Figures 1 below:

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

### Data Collection

Data was gathered electronically using the *Qualtrics* online survey software (<http://www.qualtrics.com/>). In order to reach motivated participants, the link was listed in several *Facebook* interest groups on, as well as sent out to personal email addresses via various interest-based Listservs. The Listservs were obtained through JISCMail, which is an online charity that holds an extensive UK database of email discussion lists for education and research communities. In addition, the first author approached organisations they had professional relationships with to ask for permission to circulate the link to the study among employees. To obtain participants for the therapist sample, the first author approached various training courses for trainee counselling and clinical psychologists to ask for permission to circulate the link to the study via email.

By clicking on the link participants were directed to information about the study and the potential uses of their data. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and consent was obtained via the survey software. Only after participants had indicated their consent by clicking on an online box were they directed to the story stems.

### Participant Demographics

Information was collected from participants to 'situate the sample' in terms of socio-cultural demographics (Elliot, Fisher & Rennie 1999). 'Therapist' was used as a label to encompass all professionals who identified as applying psychological therapy with clients (e.g., counselling and clinical psychologists, CBT therapists, psychotherapists, systemic therapists and psychodynamic therapists etc.). Because the authors were not interested in the impact of a particular therapeutic tradition per se, but rather the impact of therapeutic training on people's relationship to heteronormative patriarchal discourse, 'therapists' from diverse training backgrounds were included. Whilst therapeutic training encompasses a broad array of philosophical orientations, there is a common expectation that therapists will have a greater understanding of the human condition and a more sophisticated grasp of social relationships (Feltham, 2007). See Table 2 for demographic characteristics of the sample and Table 3 for professional characteristics of the therapists' sample.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

[Insert Table 3 about here]

### **Thematic Analysis**

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2013) approach to thematic analysis (TA), which is composed of six phases of coding and theme development. In the first phase data were read and re-read to note any initial analytic observations (phase 1). The second phase involved a process of systematic data coding, identifying key features of the data (phase 2), which was then examined for broader patterns of meaning or 'candidate themes' (phase 3). After a process of review and refinement (phases 4 and 5), various themes

were generated. The write-up constituted the final phase (6) of analysis and involved selecting illustrative data extracts and the weaving together of theme definitions (5) and other analytic notes into a coherent analytic narrative.

TA has been used slightly differently to analyse SC data compared to how it is used to analyse self-report data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012). Instead of identifying patterns across the stories as a whole, patterns are identified in specific elements of the story. For example, SC research on perceptions of infidelity in relationships has identified themes in how the relationship (both that between the couple, and that between the unfaithful partner and the 'other' man/woman) is depicted, how infidelity is accounted for, and how the responses to and consequences of infidelity are presented (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2005). Hence particular questions guide the data analysis (in advance of the analysis, or after data familiarisation) and use the techniques of TA to identify patterns in relation to these questions.

This analysis considers questions such as: 'How is Sarah's reaction to sexual experimentation constructed compared to Matt's? And is interested how these constructions reinscribe or challenge traditional understandings of gender and sexuality, and to what extent therapists conceptualisations differ from those who have not been therapeutically trained.

Following previous SC research, where appropriate, findings are reported in percentages to illustrate the prevalence of particular themes in the data.

## Results

The results are reported under three main headings: (1) sexual experimentation as a

demonstration of being normal; (2) addressing relational power imbalances through sexual experimentation; and (3) comparing the differences between therapists' and non-therapists' responses. Grammatical and spelling errors have been corrected in the data to aid readability and comprehension; the use of '[...]' signals editing of the data to remove superfluous text. Data extracts are tagged with the following information: Participant number (ranging from 1-100), sex (F-female, M-male), profession (T-therapist, NT-non-therapist,) and version of the story SES (Sarah makes the suggestion), SEM (Matt makes the suggestion).

### **Sexual experimentation as a demonstration of being normal**

Forty-eight percent of the stories depicted sexual experimentation as an expected part of 'good' sexual practice. 'Vanilla sex' (sex that is deemed conventional by contemporary culture) was regarded as undesirable and dull, whereas kink/BDSM and pornographic sex were depicted as aspirational goals for Matt and Sarah. In her 1984 landmark essay 'Thinking sex', Rubin examined the value system inherent in social understandings of sexual practice that results in some behaviours being defined as good/natural and others as bad/unnatural. She introduced the idea of the 'Charmed circle' of sexuality wherein privileged forms of sexuality reside and unprivileged forms occupy the 'outer limits'. The results may suggest a reorganisation of Rubin's 'Charmed Circle' of sexuality; sex acts previously deemed to be in the 'outer limits' of sexuality (manufactured objects, threesomes etc.) were frequently suggested as an expected part of sexual practice. Whilst the criteria of what constitutes 'charmed' may have been overturned, the desire to be 'charmed' persists. Indeed, in many stories Matt and Sarah are presented as suggesting the 'rudest thing' they can think of despite feeling ambivalent or uncomfortable about doing so. For example, Sarah offered a 'tit

wank', as it was the 'rudest thing she could think of' (69FTSES), and Matt agreed to Sarah's request of using whips as 'he didn't want to appear boring' (81MTSES). The tendency for participants' to represent particularly narrow conceptualisation of desirable sexuality can be understood as an expression of the need to be perceived as 'normal' (Tiefer, 2012).

Whilst the de-stigmatisation of BDSM and kink serves to alleviate associated stress for people engaged in these sexual cultures (Taylor & Ussher, 2001), it may also be seen as setting a new benchmark for normative (hetero)sexual practice, and therefore places additional expectations onto heterosexual couples (Barker, 2013; Weiss, 2006). Indeed, engagement in adventurous and exciting sex acts was regarded as a universally accepted marker of 'good' sex. Martin, (2013) observed soaring sales of BDSM-lite product following the release of the Fifty Shades tribology (E.L. James 2011, 2012) which can be interpreted as evidence for the cultural change in sexual practices that is driven by a desire for social cohesion. In that sense, sexual experimentation can be seen to provide Sarah and Matt, both as a couple and as individuals, with a way to signal and perform their normality. The extracts below illustrate that despite being content with their sexual routine, both Matt and Sarah seek to alter their practice following an unfavourable comparison to others. Little reference was made to how sexual experimentation may increase their own pleasure and satisfaction:

'Sarah was always talking to her friends about what they were getting up to sexually. She found that her and Matt's relationship was rather dull compared to theirs so suggested to experiment' (55MNTSES).

'Matt has been talking to his friends who regularly have sex with a number of different partners; they have told Matt about the performance of their sexual

partners and Matt is therefore keen to try something new with Sarah. Sarah has also spoken to her close friends about her sex life and her friends have encouraged Sarah to be more adventurous [...] Matt and Sarah try something out that Matt has heard his friends talking about and seen on the Internet.’ (83MTSEM)

Both of these extracts show how other people’s practices of sex were presented as directly impacting on the couple. By using ‘friends’ as a plural it gives the impression that the wider collective is engaging in particular sexual practices and serves to normalise these practices. The desire to be part of this collective and be ‘normal’ was depicted as overriding previous sexual satisfaction. This need to conform to socially set ideals was depicted as driving Sarah to suggest sex acts which she perceives ‘all men love’ (13FNTSES) as a way to keep Matt’s attention. For example: ‘Sarah suggests they should try anal sex [...] partly because she thought that men in general liked to have anal sex’ (54MNTSES). The motivation for Sarah to introduce anal sex into their routine was not to increase her own pleasure but to increase her ability to satisfy Matt: ‘She wanted to please her new partner whom she was beginning to fall in love with’ (54MNTSES). This participant positioned Sarah’s suggestion as a way of showing her love for Matt. In so doing, the story reinforced the idea that satisfying male sexual desire is a central tenet of women’s role in heterosexual (Tiefer 2008). Sarah’s concern was presented as primarily about how her suggestion may affect her value as a sexual commodity: ‘she began to think that perhaps Matt had not done anal sex before and she began to worry that he might think she was dirty or slutty’ (54MNTSES). This story was underpinned by the idea that the same sexual request can both increase a woman’s value (she is adventurous) and decrease it (she is dirty, slutty); Matt ‘started to feel slightly uneasy

at the thought of his girlfriend having anal sex with previous partners, as a consequence Sarah was beginning to regret making the suggestion' (54MNTSES).

Similarly, in another story, when Matt suggests anal sex Sarah doesn't consider this on the basis of whether it will give her pleasure but on the basis of increasing or decreasing her value as a sexual commodity to Matt: 'he has heard that it is good and just about everyone does it [...] She can't see how anal sex will bring her any pleasure and she's worried about hygiene issues [...] Matt tells her not to be silly [...] he loves her and he thinks the view will be 'hot'.' (13FNTSES)

Matt's offer of reassurance 'the view will be hot' is misplaced as Sarah was not represented as having voiced any anxiety about her appearance. While Matt is portrayed as being patronising and dismissive of Sarah's worries about hygiene, his offer of reassurance suggests that Sarah's appearance during sex acts is important. His sexual curiosity about something that 'he heard is good' (13FNTSES) appeared to take precedence over Sarah's concern in the stories. This may be understood within a heteronormative framework that assumes men want sex and women want relationships (Potts, 2002). Both, Matt and Sarah are portrayed as understanding these to be exchangeable commodities, whereby sex or certain sex acts may be offered or requested in exchange for relationship security:

'Sarah agrees to try it so long as he goes slowly and stops if it is too painful- Sarah is surprised that it didn't hurt as much as she thought but she didn't really enjoy it. 'She's worried Matt has really liked it and will want to make it a regular activity in their sex life. She asks Matt what he thought. He tells her it was okay, not really as good as he'd hoped. Sarah feels like she's done something wrong, like perhaps she didn't do it right. She hears

that all men love anal so she worries that something went wrong for Matt to say he 'could take it or leave it' (13FNTSES).

This participant told a story in which Matt's sexuality is prioritised, by suggesting that Matt's experience of pleasure is a legitimate reason for Sarah to consent sex acts that she anticipates may be painful. Sarah is constructed in a lose/lose position as she is worried both about Matt liking it and at the same time not liking it. Because he did not '*really*' like it:

'She feels' irrationally violated, like she consented to something she didn't want, just to make him happy, and he doesn't even appreciate it. They decide not to have anal sex again in the future. Sarah can't stop worrying that Matt is not satisfied with their sex life so she makes sure he knows that she's still open to trying new things.' (13FNTSES)

Matt is positioned as not only 'needing' sex, but also 'deserving' pleasure. This has been termed the 'double standard' that 'subordinates women's sexuality to that of men' (Jackson & Cram, 2003: 115; see also Hite, 1976/2004). Sarah is presented as 'irrational' for feeling violated, since she consented to the sex act. Indeed, she may not have felt violated if he had been more appreciative. The pleasure gained from pleasing Matt would have therefore made it a worthwhile endurance. It is only in the absence of Matt's pleasure that Sarah's reward fails to manifest, thereby drawing attention to her 'poor' investment. Indeed, in the stories, preserving the role of the enticer is Sarah's main objective. In the extract below Sarah is depicted as rejecting the idea of anal sex not because she will not find it pleasurable but because Matt may change his mind about it and find it 'rubbish':

‘If it is rubbish we’ll just won’t do it again? If it is rubbish? Sarah thought, are you joking? The only reason why it would be rubbish if you suddenly get turn off because it becomes apparent to you that your face is in a place you would only see if you lived inside a toilet, that’s why. And once the disgust is planted there is no going back that would be it, we could never see each other again.....one of us would probably have to leave town....what a stupid idea’ (26FTSEM).

This shows that Sarah takes account of all of Matt’s possible future feelings when deciding to accept or reject the suggestion of a sex act. Disgust is presented as a plausible outcome which, once evoked, is feared to permeate his perception of and feelings about her. This highlights the importance attributed to Sarah’s potential to evoke sexual excitement in Matt. Once this is reduced Sarah’s ability to ‘have’ and ‘hold’ Matt may also diminish and therefore threaten the future of the relationship.

### **Addressing relational power imbalances through sexual experimentation**

While heterosexual relationships have been identified as a primary site of women’s oppression by some feminist scholars (e.g., Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994; MacKinnon, 1987), and heterosexual desire has been regarded as eroticised power difference (Jeffrey, 1990), it is important to identify instances where hegemonic heteronormative sense making is resisted, particularly, if feminist research is to serve any emancipatory agenda (Hockey et al., 2007). In the stories written by women where Sarah suggest ‘something new’, 16% of stories evidence resistance of the ‘have/hold’ discourse by drawing on discourses of reciprocity when making sense of either Sarah’s sexual request or her response to Matt’s sexual requests. Indeed, the engagement in sex acts is also seen as an important vehicle for

producing egalitarianism within relationships, as well as a mechanism through which power may be redistributed. For example, Sarah assertively states that she is willing to engage in anal sex, not because she wishes to, or because he has asked her to, but because it allows her to make the same request of him. Sarah's willingness to agree to anal sex is therefore conditional:

'He should also be penetrated by her with a dildo. Matt is shocked and says he is not curious on anal because he is not Gay and that he has no interest in being penetrated. Sarah laughs and says she did not think only gay men could enjoy anal sex, that she thinks it is a matter of equality in sex - if she does that for him then he should also do that for her, which requires similar preparation (condom use, lubricant, relaxation and confidence in the other). Matt spends some weeks without mentioning it and then he admits it is a matter of justice and equality and that he never thought she would ask him that.' (78FTSES)

'He's suggesting they assume a bit of role-play and that she takes on a role where she's a bit subordinate and he's the boss. She laughs a bit, in a good hearted way. But she suggests actually that she be the boss and he's the one who is a bit subordinate, and she suggests in fact that he's very subordinate, and will need to do exactly what he's told, or he'll be in trouble.' (6FNTSES)

The frequency of the depiction of sexual relationship without a pleasure narrative is striking. Sex is regarded as a site where equality can be negotiated. Sarah insists on what is framed as an 'equal exchange' of sex acts as a way to produce equality in the relationship. Similarly, the following story resists the common use of an active male and passive female

narrative (Jackson & Cram, 2003) by depicting a mutual and simultaneous use of the vibrator. The focus here again is on the equal distribution of power through the suggestion of simultaneous access to pleasure:

‘[Matt] reaches down under the bed to bring out a shiny metal vibrator [...] ‘Well come on’, says Sarah, ‘switch it on and let’s see what it does, they both become more aroused, they stop giggling, and with Matt and Sarah lying side by side, share the vibrator moving it between penis and clitoris to bring them both to a warm, all enveloping, intense climax.’ (2FNTSEM)

Other instances of resisting a more passive representation of women include a depiction of Sarah as a ‘femme fatal’ with hidden and ‘dark’ sexual desires. Concurrent with classic conceptualisation of ‘la femme fatal’ (Allen, 1983), Sarah is presented as a mysterious and seductive woman whose charms ensnare her lover Matt, leading him into compromising and dangerous situations:

‘Sarah explains that she gets off on having sex in public places, saying that the higher the risk of being caught by someone the better. Although Matt has little experience of this, he finds Sarah so exciting that he agrees in an instant! [...] before Matt knew it he had started dogging with Sarah with other people in the park, Sarah's lust for risk had increased to taking drugs to enhance her orgasms and having unprotected sex with strangers. Matt knew this was wrong, and noticed a change in Sarah. Her moods changed on a daily basis, from being excessively clingy to pushing him away. Matt was torn by what was right morally and his love for Sarah.’ (86FTSES)

Sarah's suggestion of something new is framed as leading to 'dark and dangerous' places, that put herself and Matt as well as their relationship at risk. Sarah's pursuit of her sexual desires is depicted as impacting on her mental health, and her ability to make rational decisions is represented as significantly impaired. The presentation of women as a 'femme fatal', positions men as victims of their sexual charms, which serves to offload responsibility for subsequent sexual acts. The idea of 'la femme fatal' is underpinned by a virgin/whore binary (Denmark & Paludi, 1993), which regards female sexuality either in terms of its reproductive purpose or as an object of male desire, thereby limiting the range of female sexual expression (Ussher, 1993, 2006).

### **Comparing therapists' responses and non-therapists' responses**

Therapists largely drew on the same heteronormative discourses as the participants who had not been therapeutically trained. However, there were some differences in the stories written by the two groups. Whilst therapists' conceptualisations of masturbation and sexual experimentation were mostly heteronormative, they framed the reactions of the characters in the scenarios in markedly different ways from non-therapists. As a result, therapists' stories differed on various levels. Firstly, therapists tended to write stories that were more emotionally complex. For example, the characters tended to go through greater emotional variation; from initially experiencing two or more emotions (often conflicting) to being depicted as undergoing emotional change as the narrative develops, and usually arriving at an entirely new emotion towards the end of the story. The process by which the character's emotions shifted was through internal dialogue. Unlike the stories written by non-therapists, the therapists' stories commonly advocated communication, and often

depicted it as a gateway to improved relationships. As such therapists' stories included more direct speech and depicted both characters' internal thoughts to a greater extent. Therapists' stories not only constructed communication as an important component in people's relationship, but also constructed more positive outcomes through effective communication.

Therapists' stories were more likely to contain multiple viewpoints than non-therapist stories. This allowed the writer to take a more detached position from the narrative. Detachment could be regarded as a way of safeguarding the therapists' professionalism. One therapist made it clear that he was 'borrowing' the narrative from a client who had presented to therapy with a similar situation: 'this parallels the narrative of a female client I am working with' (111MTSES). Holding a removed position may be understood as a manifestation of therapists' professional training, which advocates a detached, self-controlled stance in trainees (Feltham, 2007). Similarly, synonymous with the clinical competencies of therapists, therapists' often gave a 'formulation' for the character's behaviour. For example, therapists, unlike non therapists, sought to explain the character's behaviour through previous life events. Matt's shyness was related to growing 'up as an only child of conservative parents' (110FTSES), Sarah's forthrightness was explained by 'her parent's liberal attitude towards sex' (87FTSES). This not only provided richer accounts of the characters but also served to signal further the therapist's removed position and professional approach to completing the stories.

## Conclusion

This study explored how sexual experimentation in the context of heterosex is situated in wider socio-cultural discourses. This research demonstrates how a multitude of imperatives can come together to regulate and police heterosex, by placing obligations on people to not only be 'normal' but also to be 'good' at performing sex. Rather than creating new possibilities for men and women, the findings suggest that the mainstreaming of pornography and kink has placed new expectations onto people and altered the parameters of what it means to be normal. As such more 'transgressive' versions of sex merely act as a veneer that mask older and more traditional forms of a hegemonic ideology of sex. The gendered nature of 'old' heteronormative discourses interweave to produce different mechanisms for meeting these 'new' obligations. The consequences of failing to conform to these new heteronorms remain gendered, which renders the choices in reproducing or resisting these unequal for men and women.

The stories constructed the characters' concern with being 'charmed' or 'normal' as the driving factor in their decision to engage in, or refrain from, particular sexual practices. As such, the binaries that demarcate the boundaries between 'charmed' and 'uncharmed' practices continue to maintain the desire to stay on the 'charmed' side of this boundary. For example, sexual experimentation was constructed in ways that created obligations on the characters to engage in particular forms of sex rather than liberating them to pursue greater sexual freedoms. This contrasts the assumption that the influence of pornography on representations of mainstream sex (Gill 2009, Attwood 2006, McNair 2002) has increased access to pleasure through making a more diverse representations of sex available (Weiss, 2006). Instead of giving greater access to pleasure, the concept of sexual experimentation

was employed as a vital tool that allowed the characters to perform normative sex. As such, both male and female characters were frequently depicted as feeling pressured to suggest 'something new', as well as to respond positively when 'something new' was suggested to them, despite being portrayed as feeling anxious and uncomfortable.

Indeed, critical sex therapists suggest that individuals' desire to be normal has a greater influence on their sexual practices than their desire to experience pleasure (Barker, 2011; Kashak & Tiefer, 2001; Kleinplatz, 1998, 2004; Tiefer, 2001, 2003, 2012). They argue that the distress about not feeling 'normal' drives people to seek treatment to overcome physical barriers to 'normal' (hetero)sex (e.g., penis-in-vagina). Conventional treatments often disregard the importance of pleasure, and in making such treatments available, therapists collude with individuals' anxieties about being 'normal' and can inadvertently turn therapy into an oppressive perpetuator of a 'toxic norm' (Kleinplatz, 2012; p. 117).

This study contributes to the growing body of critical scholarship on heterosex, and offers new findings about how the conceptualisation sexual experimentation may be situated in people's social and personal lives. Patterns in depictions of male and female sexuality could be observed across both scenarios, which highlights the pervasive nature and the regulatory power that cultural discourses hold over how people make sense of (hetero)sexual relationships and the men and women within them. Additionally, this research demonstrates the pervasive and perpetual nature of patriarchal hegemonic discourse, by showing that people who have been therapeutically trained are locked into the same heteronormative and restrictive discourses of heterosex as people who have not been.

Whilst therapists' stories of sexual experimentation drew on the same heteronormative discourses as the stories written by people who had not been therapeutically trained, there were some marked differences between the stories. The differences in the stories written by the two participant groups were especially apparent in the therapists' sense making around relational problems and difficulties. Therapeutic training and practice revolves around finding creative and meaningful solutions to the difficulties people present with (Johnstone & Dallos 2014; Tribe, 2015). The close link between the core attributes of therapeutic training and the distinct features of the therapist's stories suggests that they drew on their professional skills and experiences to make sense of the characters' relationships. Professional training may give therapists access to broader discourses around relationships, problems and difficulties (Moon, 2011). It would seem that the lack of training in sexual issues and the absence of a critical understanding of sex also impacted on the range of discursive possibilities available to therapists in their sense making of sex. It therefore follows that offering therapists' critical frameworks for making sense of heterosex, would potentially increase therapists' discursive repertoire and foster a more nuanced understanding of how heteronormativity continues to perpetuate constraining and oppressive practices of gender expression.

A number of recommendations for research, training and practice arise directly from this research. First, we recommend an integration of social constructionist approaches into the training and supervision of psychologists and suggests that the adoption of such critical positions become expected attributes of psychological practice and particularly clinical leadership. Greater criticality will also allow applied psychology to advance political debates

around the role of psychological theory and practice in perpetuating social oppression, connect important gaps between critical and applied psychology and thus not only look behind the mirrors in the therapy room but also psychology as a discipline more widely.

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Table 1: The different versions of the story stem

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Sexual Experimentation Story (Matt):	<i>Matt and Sarah have been having sex for a while, tonight Matt suggests trying something new...</i>
Sexual Experimentation Story (Sarah):	<i>Sarah and Matt have been having sex for a while, tonight Sarah suggests trying something new...</i>

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Table 2: Participant demographics

<i>Participant Group</i>	<i>Female Therapist s</i>	<i>Male Therapists</i>	<i>Total Therapists</i>	<i>Female N- Therapists</i>	<i>Male N- Therapists</i>	<i>Total NT</i>
<i>Total Number</i>	30	28	<b>58</b>	30	24	<b>53</b>
<i>Heterosexual</i>	28	25	<b>53</b>	19	19	<b>38</b>
<i>Bisexual</i>	2	-	<b>2</b>	6	-	<b>6</b>
<i>Gay Men</i>	-	3	<b>3</b>	-	3	<b>3</b>
<i>Lesbian</i>	-	-	-	2	-	<b>2</b>
<i>SND*</i>	-	-	-	3	2	<b>5</b>
<i>21-30</i>	8	7	<b>15</b>	11	6	<b>17</b>
<i>31-40</i>	16	11	<b>27</b>	11	11	<b>22</b>
<i>41-50</i>	2	6	<b>8</b>	3	2	<b>5</b>
<i>51+</i>	3	3	<b>6</b>	4	3	<b>7</b>
<i>SND*</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>White</i>	27	22	<b>48</b>	29	19	<b>45</b>
<i>Black</i>	-	5	<b>5</b>	-	3	<b>3</b>
<i>Asian</i>	2	1	<b>3</b>	-	2	<b>2</b>
<i>Middle Eastern</i>	-	-	-	1	-	<b>1</b>
<i>Mixed Ethnicity</i>	1	-	<b>1</b>	1	-	<b>1</b>
<i>PNTS</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Single</i>	2	8	<b>10</b>	7	5	<b>11</b>
<i>Partnered</i>	26	19	<b>45</b>	22	16	<b>38</b>
<i>SND*</i>						

Table 3: Professional practice characteristics of therapist sample

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<b>Years of Practice</b>	
1-5	15
	10
6-10	9
11+	9
Supplied no data	3
	7
<b>Amount of training in sexual issues</b>	
	2
No training	3
Some training	
Trained as sex therapist	14
	20
Supplied no data	8
How frequently does sex come up in your work with clients?	5
	6
Never	1
Occasionally	2
	3
Frequently	
SND	
<b>Therapeutic orientation</b>	
	5
Psychodynamic	4
Humanistic	16
	18
CBT	7
Systemic	5

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SND	1
	2
	8
	3
	6
	12
	7
	3
	7
	8
	2
	3

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Figure 1: Number of participant stories per comparative level (sexual experimentation stem)

